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SOLAR LOTTERY

PHILIP K. DICK

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Philip K. Dick was born in Chicago in 1928 and lived most of his life in California. He briefly attended the University of California, but dropped out before completing any classes. In 1952, he began writing professionally and proceeded to write numerous novels and short-story collections. He won the Hugo Award for the best novel in 1962 for *The Man in the High Castle* and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for best novel of the year in 1974 for *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said.* Philip K. Dick died on March 2, 1982, in Santa Ana, California, of heart failure following a stroke.

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ONE

There had been harbingers. Early in May of 2203, news-machines were excited by a flight of white crows over Sweden. A series of unexplained fires demolished half the Oiseau-Lyre Hill, a basic industrial pivot of the system. Small round stones fell near work-camp installations on Mars. At Batavia, the Directorate of the nine-planet Federation, a two-headed Jersey calf was born: a certain sign that something of incredible magnitude was brewing.

Everybody interpreted these signs according to his own formula; speculation on what the random forces of nature intended was a favorite pastime. Everybody guessed, consulted, and argued about the bottle—the socialized instrument of chance. Directorate fortunetellers were booked up weeks in advance.

But one man's harbinger is another man's event. The first reaction from Oiseau-Lyre Hill to its limited catastrophe was to create total catastrophe for fifty percent of its classified employees. Fealty oaths were dissolved, and a variety of trained research technicians were tossed out. Cut adrift, they became a further symptom of the nearing moment-of-importance for the system. Most of the severed technicians floundered, sank down, and were lost among the unclassified masses. But not all of them.

Ted Benteley yanked his dismissal notice from the board the moment he spotted it. As he walked down the hall to his office he quietly tore the notice to pieces and dropped the bits down a disposal slot. His reaction to dismissal was intense, overpowering, and immediate. It differed from the reaction of those around him in one significant respect: he was glad to have his oath severed. For

thirteen years he had been trying every legal stratagem to break his fealty oath with Oiseau-Lyre.

Back in his office, he locked the door, snapped off his Inter-Plan Visual Industries screen, and did some rapid thinking. It took only an hour to develop his plan of action, and that plan was refreshingly simple.

At noon, Oiseau-Lyre's outworker department returned his power card, obligatory when an oath was severed from above. It was odd seeing the card again after so many years. He stood holding it awkwardly a moment, before he carefully put it away in his wallet. It represented his one chance out of six billion in the great lottery, his fragile possibility of being twitched by the random motion of the bottle to the number One class-position. Politically speaking, he was back thirty-three years; the p-card was coded at the moment of birth.

At 2:30, he dissolved his remaining fealty connections at Oiseau-Lyre; they were minor and mostly with himself as protector and somebody else as serf. By 4:00 he had collected his assets, liquidated them on an emergency basis (taking a high percentage loss on the fast exchange), and bought a first-class ticket on a public transport. Before nightfall he was on his way out of Europe, heading directly toward the Indonesian Empire and its capital.

In Batavia he rented a cheap room in a boardinghouse and unpacked his suitcase. The rest of his possessions were still back in France; if he was successful he could get them later, and if he wasn't they wouldn't matter. Curiously, his room overlooked the main Directorate building. Swarms of people like eager tropical flies crept in and out of its multiple entrances. All roads and all spacelanes led to Batavia.

His funds didn't amount to much; he could stall only so long and then action was obligatory. From the Public Information Library he picked up armloads of tape and a basic scanner. As the days passed he built up an armory of information relating to all phases of biochemistry, the subject on which his original classification had

been won. As he scanned and crammed he kept one grim thought in mind: applications for positional-fealty oaths to the Quizmaster were processed only once; if he failed on the first try he was through.

That first try was going to be something. He was free of the Hill system, and he wasn't going back.

During the next five days he smoked endless cigarettes, paced an infinite number of times around his room, and finally got out the yellow section of the ipvic directory to look up the local bed girl agencies. His favorite agency had a nearby office; he made a grateful call, and within an hour most of his psychological problems were in the past. Between the slim blonde sent by the agency and the swank cocktail bar down the street, he was able to last another twenty-four hours. But that was as far as he could string it out. The time to act had come; it was now or never.

A cold chill lay over him as he got out of bed that morning. Quizmaster Verrick's hiring was integrated on the basic principle of Minimax: positional oaths were apparently passed out on a random basis. In six days Benteley hadn't been able to plot a pattern. It was impossible to infer what factor—if any—determined successful application. He perspired, took a quick shower, and perspired again. In spite of his days of cramming he had learned nothing. He was going in blind. He shaved, dressed, paid Lori her wages, and then sent her back to the agency.

Loneliness and fear hit him hard. He surrendered his room, stored his suitcase, and, for a better margin of safety, bought himself a second good luck charm. In a public washroom he buttoned the charm inside his shirt and dropped a dime in the phenolbarb dispenser. The sedative calmed him a trifle; he emerged and flagged down a robot taxi.

"Main Directorate building," he told the driver. "And take your time."

"All right, sir or madam," the MacMillan robot answered, adding, "Whatever you say." MacMillans weren't capable of fine

discriminations.

Warm spring air billowed into the cab as it zipped above the rooftops. Benteley wasn't interested; his eyes were fixed on the growing syndrome of buildings ahead. The night before his written papers had been shot in. He had waited about the right time; they should be appearing on the desk of the first checker along the unlimited chain of Directorate officials.

"Here we are, sir or madam." The robot taxi settled down and grappled itself to a halt. Benteley paid it and stepped from the open door.

People hurried everywhere. The air buzzed with a constant murmur of excitement. The tension of the last few weeks had risen to fever pitch. Ramp hawkers were peddling "methods," low priced sure-fire theories guaranteed to predict bottle twitches and beat the whole Minimax game. The hawkers were ignored by the hurrying throngs of people; anybody with a genuine system of prediction would be using it, not selling it.

On a main pedestrian artery Benteley paused to light a cigarette. His hands weren't shaking, not really. He shoved his briefcase under his arm and put his hands in his pockets as he continued slowly toward the processing lounge. The heavy check-arch passed around him and he was inside. Perhaps by this time next month he would be under fealty to the Directorate … he gazed up hopefully at the arch and touched one of the charms inside his shirt.

"Ted," a voice came, small and urgent. "Wait."

He halted. Breasts bobbing, Lori threaded her way through the tight-packed crowd and came quickly up to him. "I have something for you," she said breathlessly. "I knew I'd catch you here."

"What is it?" Benteley demanded tautly. He was conscious that the Directorate's teep Corps was close by; he didn't particularly want his intimate thoughts in the hands of eighty bored telepaths.

"Here." Lori reached around his neck and clicked something in place. Passers-by grinned in sympathetic amusement; it was another good luck charm.

Benteley examined the charm. It looked like an expensive one. “You think it’ll do me any good?” he asked her. Seeing Lori again wasn’t part of his plans.

“I hope so.” She touched his arm briefly. “Thanks for being so nice. You hustled me off before I could tell you.” She lingered plaintively. “You think you have much of a chance? Gee, if you get taken on, you’ll probably stay here in Batavia.”

Irritated, Benteley answered, “You’re being teeped while you stand here. Verrick has them planted all over the place.”

“I don’t mind,” Lori said wistfully. “A bed girl has nothing to conceal.”

Benteley wasn’t amused. “I don’t like it. I’ve never been teeped in my life.” He shrugged. “But I guess if I’m going to lock on here, I’ll have to get used to it.”

He moved toward the central desk, his i.d. and power cards ready. The line moved rapidly. A few moments later the MacMillan official accepted them, devoured them, and then addressed him peevishly. “All right, Ted Benteley. You may go in now.”

“Well,” Lori said wanly, “I guess I’ll be seeing you. If you get locked on here …”

Benteley stubbed out his cigarette and turned toward the entrance of the inner offices. “I’ll look you up,” he murmured, scarcely aware of the girl. He pushed past the rows of waiting people, swept his briefcase tight against him, and stepped quickly through the door. The door snapped instantly shut behind him.

He was inside: it had begun.

A small middle-aged man with steel-rimmed glasses and a tiny waxed mustache was standing by the door watching him intently. “You’re Benteley, are you?”

“That’s right,” Benteley answered. “I’m here to see Quizmaster Verrick.”

“Why?”

“I’m looking for a class 8-8 position.”

A girl pushed abruptly into the office. Ignoring Benteley, she said rapidly, “Well, it’s over.” She touched her temple. “See? Now are you satisfied?”

“Don’t blame me,” the small man said. “It’s the law.”

“The law!” The girl slid up onto the desk and shrugged her tangle of crimson hair back out of her eyes. She grabbed a package of cigarettes from the desk and lit up with shaky, nervous fingers. “Let’s get the hell out of here, Peter. There’s nothing of importance left.”

“You know I’m staying,” the small man said.

“You’re a fool.” The girl half turned as she noticed Benteley for the first time. Her green eyes flickered with surprise and interest. “Who are you?”

“Maybe you better come back some other time,” the small man said to Benteley. “This isn’t exactly the—”

“I didn’t come this far to get the runaround,” Benteley said hoarsely. “Where’s Verrick?”

The girl eyed him curiously. “You want to see Reese? What are you selling?”

“I’m a biochemist,” Benteley answered savagely. “I’m looking for a class 8-8 position.”

A faint touch of amusement twisted the girl’s red lips. “Is that so? Interesting …” She shrugged her bare shoulders. “Swear him on, Peter.”

The small man hesitated. Reluctantly, he stuck out his hand. “I’m Peter Wakeman,” he said to Benteley. “This girl is Eleanor Stevens. She’s Verrick’s private secretary.”

It wasn’t exactly what Benteley had expected. There was a momentary silence as the three of them appraised one another.

“The MacMillan sent him on in,” Wakeman said presently. “There’s an open call for 8-8 people. But I think Verrick has no need for more biochemists; he’s got enough already.”

“What do you know about it?” Eleanor Stevens demanded. “It’s none of your business; you’re not running personnel.”

“I’m using common sense.” Wakeman moved very deliberately between the girl and Benteley. “I’m sorry,” he said to Benteley. “You’re wasting your time here. Go to the Hill hiring offices—they’re always buying and selling biochemists.”

“I know,” Benteley said. “I’ve worked for the Hill system since I was sixteen.”

“Then what do you want here?” Eleanor asked.

“Oiseau-Lyre dropped me.”

“Go over to Soong.”

“I’m not working for any more Hills!” Benteley’s voice lifted harshly. “I’m through with the Hills.”

“Why?” Wakeman asked.

Benteley grunted angrily. “The Hills are corrupt. The whole system’s decaying. It’s up for sale to the highest bidder … and bidding’s going on.”

Wakeman pondered. “I don’t see what that matters to you. You have your work; that’s what you’re supposed to be thinking about.”

“For my time, skill, and loyalty I get money,” Benteley agreed. “I have a clean white lab and the use of equipment that costs more to build than I’ll earn in a lifetime. I get status-insurance and total protection. But I wonder what the end result of my work is. I wonder what it’s finally put to. I wonder where it goes.”

“Where does it go?” Eleanor asked.

“Down the rat hole! It doesn’t help anybody.”

“Whom should it help?”

Benteley struggled to answer. “I don’t know. Somebody, somewhere. Don’t you want your work to do some good? I stood the

smell hanging around Oiseau-Lyre as long as possible. The Hills are supposed to be separate and independent economic units; actually they're shipments and expense padding and doctored tax returns. It goes deeper than that. You know the Hill slogan: SERVICE IS GOOD AND BETTER SERVICE IS BEST. That's a laugh! You think the Hills care about serving anybody? Instead of existing for the public good, they're parasites on the public."

"I never imagined the Hills were philanthropic organizations," Wakeman said dryly.

Benteley moved restlessly away from the two of them; they were watching him as if he were a public entertainer. Why did he get upset about the Hills? Playing classified serf to a Hill paid off; nobody had complained yet. *But he was complaining.* Maybe it was lack of realism on his part, an anachronistic survival the child-guidance clinic hadn't been able to shake out of him. Whatever it was, he had taken as much as he could stand.

"How do you know the Directorate is any better?" Wakeman asked. "You have a lot of illusions about it, I think."

"Let him swear on," Eleanor said indifferently. "If that's what he wants, give it to him."

Wakeman shook his head. "I won't swear him on."

"I will, then," the girl answered.

"You'll pardon me," Wakeman said. From the desk drawer he got a fifth of Scotch and poured himself a drink. "Anybody care to join me?"

"No, thanks," Eleanor said.

Benteley turned his back irritably. "What the hell is all this? Is this the way the Directorate is run?"

Wakeman smiled. "You see? Your illusions are being shattered. Stay where you are, Benteley. You don't know when you're well off."

Eleanor slid from the desk and hurried out of the room. She returned in a moment with the customary symbol-representation of

the Quizmaster. “Come over here, Benteley. I’ll accept your oath.” She placed a small plastic flesh-colored bust of Reese Verrick in the center of the desk and turned briskly to Benteley. “Come on.” As Benteley moved slowly toward the desk, she reached up and touched the cloth bag hanging from a string around his neck, the charm Lori had put there. “What kind of charm is that?” she asked him. She led him over beside her. “Tell me about it.”

Benteley showed her the bit of magnetized steel and white powder. “Virgin’s milk,” he explained curtly.

“That’s all you carry?” Eleanor indicated the array of charms dangling between her bare breasts. “I don’t understand how people get by with only one charm.” Her green eyes danced. “Maybe you don’t get by. Maybe that’s why you have bad luck.”

“I have a high positive scale,” Benteley began irritably. “And I have two other charms. Somebody gave me this.”

“Oh?” She leaned close and examined it intently. “It looks like the kind of charm a woman would buy. Expensive, but a little too flashy.”

“Is it true,” Benteley asked her, “that Verrick doesn’t carry any charms?”

“That’s right,” Wakeman spoke up. “He doesn’t need them. When the bottle twitched him to One he was already class 6-3. Talk about luck—that man has it. He’s risen all the way to the top, exactly as you see on the children’s edutapes. Luck leaks out of his pores.”

“I’ve seen people touch him hoping to get some of it,” Eleanor said, with shy pride. “I don’t blame them. I’ve touched him myself, many times.”

“What good has it done you?” Wakeman asked quietly; he indicated the girl’s discolored temples.

“I wasn’t born at the same time and place as Reese,” Eleanor answered shortly.

“I don’t hold with astro-cosmology,” Wakeman said calmly. “I think luck can be won or lost. It comes in streaks.” Speaking slowly

and intently to Benteley, he continued, “Verrick may have it now, but that doesn’t mean he’ll always have it. They—” He gestured vaguely upward toward the floor above. “They like to see some kind of balance.” He added hastily, “I’m not a Christian or anything like that, you understand. I know it’s all random chance.” He breathed a complicated smell of peppermint and onions into Benteley’s face. “But everybody gets his chance, someday. And the high and mighty always fall.”

Eleanor shot Wakeman a warning look. “Be careful.”

Without taking his eyes from Benteley, Wakeman said slowly, “Remember what I’m telling you. You’re out of fealty; take advantage of it. Don’t swear yourself on to Verrick. You’ll be stuck to him, as one of his permanent serfs. And you won’t like it.”

Benteley was chilled. “You mean I’m supposed to take an oath directly to Verrick? Not a positional oath to the Quizmaster?”

“That’s right,” Eleanor said.

“*Why*?”

“Things are a little uncertain right now. I can’t give you any more information. Later on, there’ll be an assignment for you in terms of your class requirements; that’s guaranteed.”

Benteley gripped his briefcase and moved aimlessly away. His strategy, his plan, had fallen apart. Nothing that he had run up against here corresponded to his expectations. “Then I’m in?” he demanded, half-angrily. “I’m acceptable?”

“Sure,” Wakeman said listlessly. “Verrick wants all the 8-8’s he can get. You can’t miss.”

Benteley retreated helplessly from the two of them. Something was wrong. “Wait,” he said, confused and uncertain. “I have to think this out. Give me time to decide.”

“Go right ahead,” Eleanor said indifferently.

“Thanks.” Benteley withdrew, to restudy the situation.

Eleanor wandered around the room, hands in her pockets.

“Any more news on that fellow?” she asked Wakeman. “I’m waiting.”

“Only the initial closed-circuit warning to me,” Wakeman said. “His name is Leon Cartwright. He’s a member of some kind of cult, a crackpot splinter organization. I’m curious to see what he’s like.”

“I’m not.” Eleanor halted at the window and stood gazing moodily out at the streets and ramps below. “They’ll be shrilling, soon. It won’t be long now.” She reached up jerkily and ran her thin fingers over her temples. “God, maybe I made a mistake. But it’s over; there’s nothing I can do.”

“It was a mistake,” Wakeman agreed. “When you’re a little older, you’ll realize how much of a mistake.”

A flash of fear slithered over the girl’s face. “I’ll never leave Verrick. I have to stay with him!”

“Why?”

“I’ll be safe. He’ll take care of me; he always has.”

“The Corps will protect you.”

“I don’t want to have anything to do with the Corps.” Her red lips drew back against her even white teeth. “My *family*. My willing uncle Peter—up for sale, like his Hills.” She indicated Benteley. “And he thinks he won’t find it here.”

“It’s not a question of sale,” Wakeman said. “It’s a principle. The Corps is above man.”

“The Corps is a fixture, like this desk.” Eleanor scraped her long nails against the surface of the desk. “You buy all the furniture, the desk, the lights, the ipvics, the Corps.” Disgust glowed in her eyes. “A Prestonite, is that it?”

“That’s it.”

“No wonder you’re anxious to see him. In a morbid way I suppose I’m curious, too. Like I would be about some sort of bizarre animal from one of the colony planets.”

At the desk, Benteley roused himself from his thoughts. “All right,” he said aloud. “I’m ready.”

“Fine.” Eleanor slipped behind the desk, one hand raised, the other on the bust. “You know the oath? Do you need help?”

Benteley knew the fealty oath by heart, but gnawing doubt slowed him almost to a halt. Wakeman stood examining his nails and looking disapproving and bored, a small negative field of radiation. Eleanor Stevens watched avidly, her face intense with a complex series of emotions that altered each moment. With a growing conviction that things were not right, Benteley began reciting his fealty oath to the small plastic bust.

As he was halfway through, the doors of the office slid back and a group of men entered noisily. One towered over the rest; he was a huge man, lumbering and broad-shouldered, with a gray, weathered face and thick iron-streaked hair. Reese Verrick, surrounded by those of his staff in personal fealty to him, halted as he saw the procedure taking place at the desk.

Wakeman glanced up and caught Verrick’s eye. He smiled faintly and said nothing; but his attitude clearly showed. Eleanor Stevens had turned rigid as stone. Cheeks flushed, body taut with feeling, she waited out Benteley’s uneasy words. As soon as he had finished, she snapped into life. She carefully hurried the plastic bust out of the office and then returned, hand held out.

“I want your p-card, Mr. Benteley. We have to have it.”

Benteley, numbed, turned over his card. There it went, once again.

“Who’s this fellow?” Verrick rumbled, with a wave toward Benteley.

“He swore on just now. An 8-8.” Eleanor nervously grabbed up her things from the desk; between her breasts her good luck charms dangled and vibrated excitedly. “I’ll get my coat.”

“8-8? Biochemist?” Verrick eyed Benteley with interest. “Is he any good?”

“He’s all right,” Wakeman said. “What I teeped seemed to be top-notch.”

Eleanor hurriedly slammed the closet door, threw her coat around her bare shoulders, and stuffed her pockets full. “He just came in, from Oiseau-Lyre.” She rushed breathlessly up to join the group clustered around Verrick. “He doesn’t know, yet.”

Verrick’s heavy face was wrinkled with fatigue and worry, but a faint spark of amusement lit his deep-set eyes, the hard gray orbs far down in the ridge of thick brow-bone. “The last crumbs, for a while. The rest goes to Cartwright, the Prestonite.” He addressed Benteley, “What’s your name?”

They shook hands, as Benteley mumbled his name. Verrick’s massive hand crunched his bones in a death-grip as Benteley feebly asked, “Where are we going? I thought—”

“Farben Hill.” Verrick and his group moved toward the exit ramp, all but Wakeman, who remained behind to await the new Quizmaster. To Eleanor Stevens, Verrick explained briefly, “We’ll operate from there. The lock I put on Farben last year was to me personally. I can still claim loyalty there, in spite of this.”

“In spite of what?” Benteley demanded, suddenly horrified. The outside doors were open; bright sunlight flooded down on them, mixed with the roar of street noises. For the first time the cries of the newsmachines burst up loudly to his ears. As the party moved down the ramp toward the field and the waiting intercon transports, Benteley demanded hoarsely, “*What’s happened*?”

“Come on,” Verrick grunted. “You’ll know all about it, before long. We’ve got too much work ahead to stand around here talking.”

Benteley slowly followed the party, the copper taste of horror thick in his mouth. He knew, now. It was being shrilled on all sides of him, screamed out by the excited mechanical voices of the public newsmachines.

“Verrick quacked!” the machines cried, as they moved among the groups of people. “Prestonite bottled to One! A twitch of the bottle

this morning at nine-thirty Batavia time! Verrrrrick totally quaaaaaacked!”

The random power-twitch had come, the event the harbingers had anticipated. Verrick had been twitched from the number One position; he was no longer Quizmaster. He had plunged to the bottom, out of the Directorate completely.

And Benteley had sworn an oath to him.

It was too late to turn back. He was on his way to the Farben Hill. All of them were caught up together in the rush of events that was shivering through the nine-planet system like a breathless winter storm.

TWO

Early in the morning Leon Cartwright drove carefully along the narrow, twisting streets in his ancient ’82 Chevrolet, his competent hands firmly gripping the wheel, his eyes on the traffic ahead. As usual, he wore an outmoded but immaculate double-breasted suit. A shapeless hat was crushed against his head, and in his vest pocket a watch ticked to itself. Everything about him breathed obsolescence and age; he was perhaps sixty, a lean, sinewy-built man, very tall and straight, but small-boned, with mild blue eyes and liver-spotted wrists. His arms were thin, but strong and wiry. He had a quiet, almost gentle expression on his gaunt face. He drove as if not completely trusting either himself or the aged car.

In the back seat lay heaps and stacks of mailing-tapes ready to be sent out. The floor sagged under heavy bundles of metalfoil to be imprinted and franked. An old raincoat was wadded in the corner, together with a stale container of lunch and a number of discarded overshoes. Wedged under the seat was a loaded Hopper popper, stuck there years ago.

The buildings on both sides of Cartwright were old and faded, thin peeling things of dusty windows and drab neon signs. They were relics of the last century, like himself and his car. Drab men, in faded pants and workjackets, hands in their pockets, eyes blank and unfriendly, lounged in doorways and against walls. Dumpy middle-aged women in shapeless black coats dragged rickety shopping carts into dark stores, to pick fretfully over the limp merchandise, stale food to be lugged back to their stuffy urine-tinged apartments, to their restless families.

Mankind's lot, Cartwright observed, hadn't changed much, of late. The Classification system, the elaborate Quizzes, hadn't done most people any good. The unks, the unclassified, remained.

In the early twentieth century the problem of production had been solved; after that it was the problem of consumption that plagued society. In the 1950's and '60's, consumer commodities and farm products began to pile up in vast towering mountains all over the Western World. As much as possible was given away—but that threatened to subvert the open market. By 1980, the pro tem solution was to heap up the products and burn them: billions of dollars' worth, week after week.

Each Saturday, townspeople had collected in sullen, resentful crowds to watch the troops squirt gasoline on the cars and toasters and clothes and oranges and coffee and cigarettes that nobody could buy, igniting them in a blinding conflagration. In each town there was a burning-place, fenced off, a kind of rubbish and ash heap, where the fine things that could not be purchased were systematically destroyed.

The Quizzes had helped, a trifle. If people couldn't afford to buy the expensive manufactured goods, they could still hope to win them. The economy was propped up for decades by elaborate give-away devices that dispensed tons of glittering merchandise. But for every man who won a car and a refrigerator and a tv set there were millions who didn't. Gradually, over the years, prizes in the Quizzes grew from material commodities to more realistic items: power and prestige. And at the top, the final exalted post: dispenser of power—Quizmaster, and that meant running the Quiz itself.

The disintegration of the social and economic system had been slow, gradual, and profound. It went so deep that people lost faith in natural law itself. Nothing seemed stable or fixed; the universe was a sliding flux. Nobody knew what came next. Nobody could count on anything. Statistical prediction became popular … the very concept of cause and effect died out. People lost faith in the belief that they could control their environment; all that remained was probable sequence: good odds in a universe of random chance.

The theory of Minimax—the M-game—was a kind of stoic withdrawal, a nonparticipation in the aimless swirl in which people struggled. The M-game player never really committed himself; he risked nothing, gained nothing … and wasn't overwhelmed. He sought to hoard his pot and strove to outlast the other players. The M-game player sat waiting for the game to end; that was the best that could be hoped for.

Minimax, the method of surviving the great game of life, was invented by two twentieth century mathematicians, von Neumann and Morgenstern. It had been used in the Second World War, in the Korean War, and in the Final War. Military strategists and then financiers had played with the theory. In the middle of the century, von Neumann was appointed to the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission: recognition of the burgeoning significance of his theory. And in two centuries and a half, it became the basis of Government.

That was why Leon Cartwright, electronics repairman and human being with a conscience, had become a Prestonite.

Signalling, Cartwright pulled his ancient car to the curb. Ahead of him the Society building gleamed dirty white in the May sun, a narrow three-story structure of wood, its single sign jutting up above the laundry next door: Preston Society Main Offices at Rear.

This was the back entrance, the loading platform. Cartwright opened the back of the car and began dragging cartons of mailing literature onto the sidewalk. The people swarming by ignored him; a few yards up a fishmonger was unloading his truck in similar fashion. Across the street a looming hotel shielded a motley family of parasitic stores and dilapidated business establishments: loan shops, cigar stores, girl houses, bars.

Rolling a carton onto his knees, Cartwright trundled it down the narrow walk and into the gloomy storage room of the building. A single atronic bulb glowed feebly in the dank darkness; supplies were stacked on all sides, towering columns of crates and wire-

bound boxes. He found an empty spot, set down his heavy load, and then passed through the hall and into the cramped little front office.

The office and its barren reception room were—as usual—empty. The front door of the building was standing wide open. Cartwright picked up a heap of mail; sitting down on the sagging couch, he spread the mail out on the table and began going through it. There was nothing of importance: bills for printing, freight, rent, overdue penalties for power and garbage collection, water and raw supplies.

Opening a letter, he removed a five dollar bill and a long note in a shaky, old-woman's handwriting. There were a few more microscopic contributions. Adding it up, he found that the Society had taken in thirty dollars.

"They're getting restless," Rita O'Neill said, appearing in the doorway behind him. "Maybe we should begin."

Cartwright sighed. The time had come. Pulling himself to his feet, he emptied an ashtray, straightened a pile of dogeared copies of Preston's *Flame Disc*, and reluctantly followed the girl down the narrow hall. Below the fly-specked photograph of John Preston, just to the left of the row of scarfhooks, he stepped forward and passed through the false slot into the vague interior passage that ran parallel to the ordinary corridor.

At sight of him, the roomful of people ceased talking abruptly. All eyes were turned; an eager hope mixed with fright shuddered around the room. Relieved, a few of the people edged toward him; the murmur boiled up again and became a babble. Now they were all trying to get his attention. A ring of excited, gesturing men and women formed about him as he moved toward the center.

"Here we go," Bill Konklin said, relieved.

Beside him, Mary Uzich said eagerly, "We've waited so long—we just can't wait any longer!"

Cartwright felt in his pockets until he found his checklist. A bewildering variety of people crowded anxiously around him: Mexican laborers mute and frightened, clutching their belongings, a hard-faced urban couple, a jet stoker, Japanese optical workmen, a

red-lipped bed girl, the middle-aged owner of a retail dry goods store that had gone quack, an agronomy student, a patent medicine salesman, a cook, a nurse, a carpenter. All of them were perspiring, shoving, listening, watching intently.

These were people with skill in their hands—not their heads. Their abilities had come from years of practice and work, from direct contact with objects. They could grow plants, sink foundations, repair leaking pipes, maintain machinery, weave clothing, cook meals. According to the Classification system they were failures.

"I think everybody's here," Jereti said tensely.

Cartwright took a deep breath of prayer and raised his voice so all could hear. "I want to say something before you leave. The ship is ready to go; it's been checked over by our friends at the field."

"That's correct," Captain Groves corroborated; he was an impressive, stern-faced Negro in leather jacket, gloves, and boots.

Cartwright rattled his scrap of crumpled metalfoil. "Well, this is it. Anybody have any doubts? Anybody want to back out?"

There was excitement and tension, but none of them stirred. Mary Uzich smiled at Cartwright and then up at the young man beside her; Konklin put his arm around her and pulled her close.

"This is what we've worked for," Cartwright continued. "This is the moment our money and time have gone to. I wish John Preston were here; he'd be glad to see this. He knew it would come, some day. He knew there'd be a ship heading out past the colony planets, beyond the regions controlled by the Directorate. In his heart he was certain that men would seek new frontiers … and freedom." He examined his watch. "Good-bye and good luck—you're on your way. Keep tight hold of your charms and let Groves do the steering."

One by one they gathered their meager possessions and shuffled out of the room. Cartwright shook hands with them, mumbled words of hope and comfort. When the last of them had gone he stood for a moment, silent and thoughtful, in the now deserted room.

“I’m glad that’s over,” Rita declared, relaxing. “I was afraid some of them would back out.”

“The unknown is a terrible place. There are monsters out there. And in one of his books Preston describes weird calling voices.” Cartwright poured himself a cup of black coffee from the silex. “Well, we have our part here. I don’t know which is worse.”

“I never really believed it,” Rita said, smoothing her black hair with an unconscious push of her slim, competent fingers. “You can change the universe … there’s nothing you can’t do.”

“There’s plenty I can’t do,” Cartwright disagreed dryly. “I’ll try a few things, start some activity here and there, put an end to something else. But they’ll get me, before long.”

Rita was appalled. “How—can you say that?”

“I’m being realistic.” His voice was hard, almost savage. “Assassins have killed every unk the bottle ever twitched. How long do you think it’ll take them to get the Challenge Convention set up? The checks and balances of this system work to check us and balance them. As far as they’re concerned, I broke the rules by just wanting to play. Anything that happens to me from now on is my own fault.”

“Do they know about the ship?”

“I doubt it.” Morbidly, he added, “I hope not.”

“You can last that long, until the ship is safe. Isn’t that the—” Rita broke off, turning in fear.

From outside the building came the sound of jets. A ship was setting down on the roof, a sudden metallic whirr like that of a steel insect. There was a staggering thump, then voices and quick movements from the floors above, as the roof trap was yanked open. Rita saw the look on her uncle’s face, the momentary terror gleaming out, the brief flash of *awareness.* Then the benign weariness and quietude filmed over, and he smiled haltingly at her.

“They’re here,” he observed, in a faint, almost inaudible voice.

Heavy military boots showed in the corridor. The green-uniformed Directorate guards fanned out around the meeting chamber; after them came a calm-faced Directorate official with a locked briefcase gripped.

"You're Leon Cartwright?" the official inquired. Leafing through the notebook he said, "Give me your papers. You have them with you?"

Cartwright slid his plastic tube from his inside coat pocket, unsnapped the seal, and spread out the thin metalfoil. One by one he laid them on the table. "Birth-certificate. School and training records. Psych-analysis. Medical certificate. Criminal record. Status permit. Statement of fealty history. Last fealty release. All the rest." He pushed the heap toward the official and then removed his coat and rolled up his sleeve.

The official glanced briefly at the papers and then compared the identification tabs with the markings seared deep in the flesh of Cartwright's forearm. "We'll have to examine fingerprints and brain pattern later. Actually, this is superfluous; I know you're Leon Cartwright." He pushed back the papers. "I'm Major Shaeffer, from the Directorate teep Corps. There are other teeps nearby. There was a power shift this morning, a little after nine."

"I see," Cartwright said, rolling his sleeve down and putting on his coat again.

Major Shaeffer touched the smooth edge of Cartwright's status permit. "You're not classified, are you?"

"No."

"I suppose your p-card was collected by your protector-Hill. That's the usual system, isn't it?"

"That's the usual system," Cartwright said. "But I'm not under fief to any Hill. As you'll see on my paper, I was discharged earlier this year."

Shaeffer shrugged. "Then, of course, you put your power card up for sale on the black market." He closed his notebook with a snap.

“Most twitches of the bottle bring up unclassifieds, since they outnumber classifieds by such a margin. But one way or another, classifieds manage to get hold of the power cards.”

Cartwright laid his power card on the table. “There’s mine.”

Shaeffer was astounded. “Incredible.” He rapidly scanned Cartwright’s mind, a suspicious, puzzled expression on his face. “You knew already. You knew this was coming.”

“Yes.”

“Impossible. It just occurred—we came instantly. The news hasn’t even reached Verrick; you’re the first person outside the Corps to know.” He moved close to Cartwright. “There’s something wrong here. How did you know it was coming?”

“That two-headed calf,” Cartwright said vaguely.

The teep official was lost in thought, still exploring Cartwright’s mind. Abruptly he broke away. “It doesn’t matter. I suppose you have some inside pipeline. I could find out; it’s in your mind, someplace deep down, carefully larded over.” He stuck out his hand. “Congratulations. If it’s all right with you, we’ll take up positions around here. In a few minutes Verrick will be informed. We want to be ready.” He pushed Cartwright’s p-card into his hand. “Hang on to this. It’s your sole claim to your new position.”

“I guess,” Cartwright said, beginning to breathe again, “I can count on you.” He pocketed the power card carefully.

“I guess you can.” Shaeffer licked his lip reflectively. “It seems strange. … You’re now our superior and Verrick is nothing. It may be some time before we can make the psychological change-over. Some of the younger Corps members who don’t remember any other Quizmaster …” He shrugged. “I suggest you place yourself in Corps hands for a while. We can’t stay here, and a lot of people at Batavia have personal fealties to Verrick, not to the position. We’ll have to screen everybody and systematically weed them out. Verrick has been using them to gain control over the Hills.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“Verrick is shrewd.” Shaeffer measured Cartwright critically. “During his Quizmastership he was challenged repeatedly. There was always somebody filtering in. We were kept busy, but I suppose that’s what we’re for.”

“I’m glad you came,” Cartwright admitted. “When I heard the noise I thought it was—Verrick.”

“It would have been, if we had notified him.” There was grim amusement in Shaeffer’s eyes. “If it hadn’t been for the older teeps, we probably would have notified him first and taken our time getting here. Peter Wakeman made a big thing of it. Responsibility and duty, that sort of thing.”

Cartwright made a mental note. He could have to look up Peter Wakeman.

“As we approached,” Shaeffer continued slowly, “our first group picked up the thoughts of a large group of people, apparently leaving here. Your name was in their minds, and this location.”

Cartwright became instantly wary. “Oh?”

“They were moving away from us, so we couldn’t catch much. Something about a ship. Something to do with a long flight.”

“You sound like a Government fortuneteller.”

“There was an intense field around them of excitement and fear.”

“I can’t tell you anything,” Cartwright repeated, with emphasis. “I don’t know anything about it.” Ironically, he added: “Some creditors, perhaps.”

In the courtyard outside the Society building Rita O’Neill paced around in a small, aimless circle, feeling suddenly lost. The great moment had come and passed; now it was part of history.

Against the Society building rose the small, barren crypt in which the remains of John Preston lay. She could see his dark, ill-formed body suspended within the yellowed fly-specked plasti-cube, hands folded over his bird-like chest, eyes shut, glasses eternally

superfluous. Small hands, crippled with arthritis, a hunched-over near-sighted creature. The crypt was dusty; trash and debris were littered around it. Stale rubbish the wind had blown there and left. Nobody came to see Preston's remains. The crypt was a forgotten, lonely monument, housing a dismal shape of clay, impotent, discarded.

But half a mile away the fleet of archaic cars was unloading its passengers at the field. The battered GM ore freighter was jammed tight on the launcher; the people were clumsily climbing the narrow metal ramp into the unfamiliar hull.

The fanatics were on their way. They were setting out for deep space to locate and claim the mythical tenth planet of the Sol System, the legendary Flame Disc, John Preston's fabulous world, beyond the known universe.

THREE

Before Cartwright reached the Directorate buildings at Batavia the word was out. He sat fixedly watching the tv screen, as the high-speed intercon rocket hurtled across the South Pacific sky. Below them were spread out blue ocean and endless black dots, conglomerations of metal and plastic house-boats on which Asiatic families lived, fragile platforms stretched from Hawaii to Ceylon.

The tv screen was wild with excitement. Faces blinked on and off; scenes shifted with bewildering rapidity. The history of Verrick's ten years was shown: shots of the massive, thick-browed ex-Quizmaster and résumés of what he had accomplished. There were vague reports on Cartwright.

He had to laugh, in a nervous aside that made the teeps start. Nothing was known about him, only that he was somehow connected with the Preston Society. The newsmachines had dug up as much as possible on the Society: it wasn't much. There were fragments of the story of John Preston himself, the tiny frail man creeping from the Information Libraries to the observatories, writing his books, collecting endless facts, arguing futilely with the pundits, losing his precarious classification, and finally sinking down and dying in obscurity. The meager crypt was erected. The first meeting of the Society was held. The printing of Preston's half-crazed, half-prophetic books was begun. …

Cartwright hoped that was all they knew. He kept his mental fingers crossed and his eyes on the tv screen.

He was now the supreme power of the nine-planet system. He was the Quizmaster, surrounded by a telepathic Corps, with a vast army and warfleet and police force at his disposal. He was unopposed

administrator of the random bottle structure, the vast apparatus of classification, Quizzes, lotteries, and training schools.

On the other hand, there were the five Hills, the industrial framework that supported the social and political system.

“How far did Verrick get?” he asked Major Shaeffer.

Shaeffer glanced into his mind to see what he wanted. “Oh, he did fairly well. By August he would have eliminated the random twitch and the whole M-Game structure.”

“Where is Verrick now?”

“He left Batavia for the Farben Hill, where he’s strongest. He’ll operate from there; we caught some of his plans.”

“I can see your Corps is going to be valuable.”

“Up to a point. Our job is to protect you: that’s all we do. We’re not spies or secret agents. We merely guard your life.”

“What’s been the ratio in the past?”

“The Corps came into existence a hundred and sixty years ago. Since then we’ve protected fifty-nine Quizmasters. Of that number we’ve been able to save eleven from the Challenge.”

“How long did they last?”

“Some a few minutes, some several years. Verrick lasted about the longest, although there was old McRae, back in ’78, who ran his whole thirteen years. For him the Corps intercepted over three hundred Challengers; but we couldn’t have done it without McRae’s help. He was a wily bastard. Sometimes I think he was a teep.”

“A telepathic Corps,” Cartwright mused, “which protects me. And public assassins to murder me.”

“Only one assassin at a time. Of course, you could be murdered by an amateur unsanctioned by the Convention. Somebody with a personal grudge. But that’s rare. He wouldn’t get anything out of it except the loss of his p-card. He’d be politically neutralized; he’d be barred from becoming Quizmaster. And the bottle would have to be stepped ahead one twitch. A thoroughly unsatisfactory event.”

“Give me my length ratio.”

“Average, two weeks.”

Two weeks, and Verrick was shrewd. The Challenge Conventions wouldn’t be sporadic affairs put together by isolated individuals, hungry for power. Verrick would have everything organized. Efficient, concerted machinery would be turning out one assassin after another, creeping and crawling toward Batavia without end, until at last the goal was reached and Leon Cartwright was destroyed.

“In your mind,” Shaeffer said, “is an interesting vortex of the usual fear and a very unusual syndrome I can’t analyze. Something about a ship.”

“You’re permitted to scan whenever you feel like it?”

“I can’t help it. If I sat here mumbling and talking you couldn’t help hearing me. When I’m with a group their thoughts blur, like a party of people all babbling at once. But there’s just you and me here.”

“The ship is on its way,” Cartwright said.

“It won’t get far. The first planet it tries to squat, Mars or Jupiter or Ganymede—”

“The ship is going all the way out. We’re not setting up another squatters’ colony.”

“You’re counting a lot on that antiquated old ore-carrier.”

“Everything we have is there.”

“You think *you* can hold on long enough?”

“I hope so.”

“So do I,” Shaeffer said dispassionately. “By the way.” He gestured toward the blooming island coming into existence ahead and below. “When we land, there will be an agent of Verrick’s waiting for you.”

Cartwright moaned sharply. “Already?”

“Not an assassin. There’s been no Challenge Convention yet. This man is under fief to Verrick, a personal staff member named Herb Moore. He’s been searched for weapons and passed. He just wants to talk to you.”

“How do you know this?”

“Within the last few minutes I’ve been getting the Corps headquarters. It’s all processed information going around from one to the next. We’re a chain, actually. You have nothing to worry about: at least two of us will be with you when you talk to him.”

“Suppose I don’t want to talk to him?”

“That’s your privilege.”

Cartwright snapped off the tv set as the ship lowered over the magnetic grapples. “What do you recommend?”

“Talk to him. Hear what he has to say. It’ll give you more of an idea what you’re up against.”

Herbert Moore was a handsome blond-haired man in his early thirties. He arose gracefully as Cartwright, Shaeffer, and two other Corpsmen entered the main lounge of the Directorate building.

“Greetings,” Moore said to Shaeffer in a bright voice.

Shaeffer pushed open the doors to the inner offices and stood aside as Cartwright entered. This was the first time the new Quizmaster had seen his inheritance. He stood in the doorway, his coat over his arm, completely entranced by the sight.

“This is a long jump from the Society building,” he said finally. Wandering slowly over, he touched the polished mahogany surface of the desk. “It’s a strange thing … I had all the abstract significance figured out in terms of power to do this, power to do that. I had it all down in symbolized form, but the sight of these carpets and this big desk—”

“This isn’t your desk,” Major Shaeffer told him. “This is your secretary’s desk. Eleanor Stevens, an ex-teep.”

“Oh.” Cartwright reddened. “Well, then where is she?”

“She left with Verrick. An interesting situation.” Major Shaeffer slammed the door after them, leaving Herb Moore in the plush lounge outside. “She was new in the Corps; she came after Verrick was Quizmaster. She was just seventeen and Verrick was the only person she ever served. After a couple of years she changed her oath from what we call a positional oath to a personal oath. When Verrick left, she packed up her stuff and trailed along.”

“Then Verrick has use of a teep.”

“She loses her supralobe, according to law. Interesting, that such personal loyalty could be built up. As far as I know, there’s no sexual relationship. In fact she’s been the mistress of Moore, the young man waiting outside there.”

Cartwright roamed around the luxurious office examining file cabinets, the massive ipvic sets, the chairs, the desk, the shifting random-paintings on the walls. “Where’s my office?”

Shaeffer kicked open a heavy door. He and the two other Corpsmen followed Cartwright past a series of check-points and thick protective stages into a bleak solid-rexeroid chamber. “Big, but not as lush,” Shaeffer said. “Verrick was a realist. When he came this was a sort of Arabian erotic house: bed girls lying around on all sides, plenty of liquor to drink, couches, music and colors going constantly. Verrick ripped all the bric-a-brac out, sent the girls to the Martian work-camps, tore down the fixtures and gingerbread, and built *this.*” Shaeffer rapped on the wall; it echoed dully. “A good twenty feet of rexeroid. It’s bomb-proof, bore-proof, shielded from radiation, has its own air-pumping system, its own temperature and humidity controls, its own food supply.” He opened a closet. “Look.”

The closet was a small arsenal.

“Verrick could handle every kind of gun known. Once a week we all went out in the jungle and shot up everything in sight. Nobody can get into this room except through the regular door. Or—” He ran his hands over one of the walls. “Verrick never missed a trick. He designed this and supervised every inch of it. When it was

finished, all the workmen went off to the camps, like Pharaoh and his tombs. During the final hours the Corps was excluded."

"Why?"

"Verrick had equipment installed he didn't plan to use while Quizmaster. However, we teeped some of the workmen as they were being loaded aboard transports. Teeps are always curious when someone tries to exclude them." He slid a section of wall aside. "This is Verrick's special passage. Ostensibly, it leads out. Realistically, it leads in."

Cartwright tried to ignore the chill perspiration coming out on his palms and armpits. The passage opened up behind the big steel desk; it wasn't hard to picture the rexeroid wall sliding back and the assassin emerging directly behind the new Quizmaster. "What do you suggest? Should I have it sealed?"

"The strategy we've worked out doesn't involve this apparatus. We'll sow gas capsules under the flooring, the length of the passage, and forget about it. The assassin will be dead before he reaches this inner lock." Shaeffer shrugged. "But this is minor."

"I'll take your advice," Cartwright managed to say. "Is there anything else I ought to know at this point?"

"You ought to hear Moore. $$He's a top-flight biochemist, a genius in his own way. He controls the Farben research labs; this is the first time he's been around here in years. We've been trying to scan something on his work, but frankly, the information is too technical for us."

One of the other teeps, a small dapper man with mustache and thinning hair, a shot glass in one hand, spoke up. "It would be interesting to know how much of that stuff Moore deliberately formulates in technical jargon to throw us off."

"This is Peter Wakeman," Shaeffer said.

Cartwright and Wakeman shook hands. The teep's fingers were dainty and fragile; diffident fingers with none of the strength Cartwright was used to finding in his unclassifieds. It was hard to

believe this was a man who headed the Corps, who had swung it away from Verrick at the critical moment. “Thanks,” Cartwright said.

“You’re welcome. But it had nothing to do with you.” The teep showed equal interest in the tall old man. “How does one get to be a Prestonite? I haven’t read any of the books; are there three?”

“Four.”

“Preston was the odd-ball astronomer who got the observatories to watch for his planet—right? They trained their telescopes and found nothing. Preston went out after it and finally died in his ship. Yes, I once thumbed through *Flame Disc.* The man who owned it was a real crackpot; I tried to teep him. All I got was a chaotic jumble of passion.”

“How do I teep?” Cartwright asked tightly.

There was a time of absolute silence. The three teeps were all at work on him; he forced his attention on the elaborate tv set in the corner and tried to ignore them.

“About the same,” Wakeman said presently. “You’re oddly phased for this society. The M-game places a great emphasis on the Aristotelian Golden Mean. You’ve got everything tied up in your ship. Outhouse or palace, if your ship goes down that’s the end of you.”

“It won’t go down,” Cartwright told him harshly.

The three teeps were amused. “In a universe of chance, nobody can predict,” said Shaeffer dryly. “It probably will be destroyed. Yet, it might get through.”

“After you’ve talked to Moore,” Wakeman said, “it’ll be interesting to see if you still predict success.”

Herb Moore slid lithely to his feet as Cartwright and Wakeman entered the lounge.

“Sit down,” Cartwright said. “I’ll talk to you here.”

Moore remained standing. “I won’t take up much of your time, Mr. Cartwright. I know you’ve got plenty to do.”

Wakeman grunted sourly.

“What do you want?” Cartwright demanded.

“Let’s put it this way. You’re in. Verrick is out. You hold the supreme position in the system. Right?”

“His strategy,” Wakeman said thoughtfully, “is to convince you you’re an amateur. That much we can get. He wants you to think you’re a sort of janitor sitting in the boss’ chair while he’s out closing some big deal.”

Moore began pacing around, cheeks flushed with excitement, gesturing vividly, highly animated by the flow of words beginning to pour out of his mouth. “Reese Verrick was Quizmaster ten years. He was Challenged daily and he met every Challenge. Essentially, Verrick is a skilled leader. He operated this job with more knowledge and ability than all the Quizmasters before him put together.”

“Except McRae,” Shaeffer pointed out, as he entered the lounge. “Don’t forget him.” He warmed up quickly. “Good old McRae.”

Cartwright felt sick at his stomach. He threw himself down in one of the soft chairs and lay wearily back as it adjusted to his weight and posture. The argument continued without him; the rapid words that flowed between the two teeps and Verrick’s bright young man were remote and dreamlike. He tried to concentrate on the reasonings, but they didn’t appear to concern him.

In many ways Herb Moore was right. He *had* blundered into somebody else’s office, position, and problems. He wondered vaguely where the ship was. Unless something had gone wrong it would soon be heading out toward Mars and the asteroid belt. Hadn’t customs fallen behind already? He examined his watch. The ship was gaining velocity at this very moment.

Moore’s sharp voice brought him back. He sat up straight and opened his eyes. “All right!” Moore was saying excitedly.

“The word’s gone out on the ipvic. The Convention will probably be held at the Westinghouse Hill; there’s more hotel space there.”

“Yes,” Wakeman was saying tightly. “That’s the usual place for the murderers to collect. There’s plenty of rooms at low rates.”

Wakeman and Moore were discussing the Challenge Convention.

Cartwright got unsteadily to his feet. “I want to talk to Moore. You two clear out of here. Go someplace else.”

The teeps conferred silently, then moved toward the door. “Be careful,” Wakeman warned him. “You’ve had a lot of emotional shocks today. Your thalamic index is too high.”

Cartwright closed the door after them and turned to face Moore. “Now we can get this settled once and for all.”

Moore smiled confidently. “Anything you say, Mr. Cartwright. You’re the boss.”

“I’m not your boss.”

“No, that’s so. A few of us stayed loyal to Reese. A few of us didn’t let him down.”

“You must think a lot of him.”

Moore’s expression showed that he did. “Reese Verrick is a big man, Mr. Cartwright. He’s done a lot of big things. He works on a vast scale.” He glowed happily. “He’s fully rational.”

“What do you want me to do? Give him back his position?” Cartwright heard his own voice waver with emotion. “I’m not giving this up. I don’t care how irrational this is. I’m here and I’m staying here. You can’t intimidate me! You can’t laugh me out!”

His voice echoed; he was shouting. He forced himself to calm down. Herb Moore smiled brightly and basked in his own warmth.

He’s young enough to be my son, Cartwright found himself thinking. He can’t be over thirty, and I’m sixty-three. He’s just a boy, a child prodigy. Cartwright tried to keep his hands from shaking, but he couldn’t. He was excited, too excited. He could hardly speak. He was all wrought up. And he was afraid.

“You can’t operate this,” Moore said quietly. “This isn’t your line. What are you? I examined the records. You were born October 5, 2140, outside the Imperial Hill. You’ve lived there all your life; this is the first time you’ve been on this side of Earth, let alone on another planet. You had ten years of nominal schooling in the charity department of the Imperial Hill. You never excelled in anything. From high school on you dropped courses that dealt with symbolization and took manual shop courses. You took welding and electronic repair, that sort of thing. You tried printing, for a while. After you got out of school you worked in a turret factory as a mechanic. You designed a few circuit improvements in plimp board design, but the Directorate rejected your patents as trivial.”

“The improvements,” Cartwright said with difficulty, “were incorporated in the bottle itself, a year later.”

“From then on you were bitter. You serviced the bottle at Geneva and saw your own designs in operation. You tried over five thousand times to win a classification, but you never had enough theoretical knowledge. When you were forty-nine you gave up. When you were fifty you joined this crackpot outfit, this Preston Society.”

“I had been attending meetings six years.”

“There weren’t many members at the time, and you finally were elected president of the Society. You put all your money and time into the crazy thing. It’s become your driving conviction, your mania.” Moore beamed happily, as if cracking an intricate equation. “And now you hold this position, Quizmaster, over a whole race, billions of people, endless quantities of men and material, maybe the sole civilization in the universe. And you see all this only as a means of expanding your Society.”

Cartwright choked futilely.

“What are you going to do?” Moore persisted. “Print a few trillion copies of Preston’s tracts? Distribute immense 3-D pictures of him and spread them all over the system? Supply statues, vast museums full of his clothing, false teeth, shoes, fingernail parings, buttons,

shrines for the faithful to visit? You already have *one* monument to go to: his worldly remains, in a broken-down wooden building in the Imperial slums, his bones on exhibit, the remains of the saint, to be touched and prayed over.

"Is that what you're planning: a new religion, a new god to worship? Are you going to organize vast fleets of ships, send out endless armadas to search for his mystic planet?" Moore saw Cartwright flinch white; he plowed on, "Are we all going to spend our time combing space for his Flame Disc, or whatever he called it? Remember Robin Pitt, Quizmaster number thirty-four? He was nineteen years old, a homosexual, a psychotic. He lived with his mother and sister all his life. He read ancient books, painted pictures, wrote psychiatric stream-of-consciousness material."

"Poetry."

"He was Quizmaster one week; then the Challenge got him—thank God. He was wandering around the jungle back of these buildings, gathering wild flowers and writing sonnets. You've read about that. Maybe you were alive; you're certainly old enough."

"I was thirteen when he was murdered."

"Remember what he had planned for mankind? Think back. Why does the Challenge-process exist? The whole bottle system is to protect us; it elevates and deprives at random, chooses random individuals at random intervals. Nobody can gain power and hold it; nobody knows what his status will be next year, next week. Nobody can plan to be a dictator: it comes and goes according to subatomic random particles. The Challenge protects us from something else. It protects us from incompetents, from fools and madmen. We're completely safe: no despots and no crackpots."

"I'm not a crackpot," Cartwright muttered hoarsely. The sound of his own voice amazed him. It was weak and forlorn, without conviction. Moore's broad smile increased; there was no doubt in his mind. "It'll take me awhile to adjust," he finished lamely. "I need time."

"You think you can adjust?" Moore asked.

"Yes!"

"I don't. You have approximately twenty-four hours. That's about how long it takes to convene a Challenge Convention and pick the first candidate. There should be a lot to choose from."

Cartwright's thin body jerked. "Why?"

"Verrick has put up a million gold dollars to the one who gets you. The offer is good until won, until you're dead."

Cartwright heard the words, but they didn't register. He was vaguely aware that Wakeman had come into the lounge and was moving up to Moore. The two of them walked away talking in low tones. He hardly heard them.

Like a frigid nightmare, the phrase "a million gold dollars" dripped and leaked into his brain. There'd be plenty of takers. With that much money an unk could buy a variety of classifications on the black market. The best minds in the system would gamble their lives for that, in a society that was a constant gamble, an unceasing lottery.

Wakeman came over to him shaking his head. "What a hopped-up mind. There was a lot of wild stuff we couldn't catch. Something about bodies and bombs and assassins and randomness. He's gone, now. We sent him off."

"What he said is true," Cartwright gasped. "He's right; I have no place here. I don't belong here."

"His strategy is to make you think that."

"But it's true!"

Wakeman nodded reluctantly. "I know. That's why it's such a good strategy. We have a good strategy, too, I think. When the time comes, you'll know about it." He suddenly grabbed Cartwright by the shoulder. "Better sit down. I'll pour you a drink; Verrick left some genuine Scotch around here, a couple of full cases."

Cartwright shook his head mutely.

"Suit yourself." Wakeman got out his pocket handkerchief and mopped his forehead. His hands were shaking. "I think I'll have one,

if you don’t mind. After teeping that high-powered blur of pathological drive, I can use a drink, myself.”

FOUR

Ted Benteley stood by the kitchen door inhaling warm smells of cooking food. The Davis house was pleasant and bright. Al Davis, minus his shoes, was sitting contentedly before the tv set in the living room, gazing earnestly at the ads. His pretty brown-haired wife Laura was preparing dinner.

"If that's protine," Benteley said to her, "it's the best job of adulteration I've smelled."

"We never have protine," Laura answered briskly. "We tried it the first year we were married, but you can taste it no matter how they fix it up. It's terribly costly to buy natural foods, of course, but it's worth it. Protine is for the unks."

"If it wasn't for protine," Al said, overhearing her, "the unks would have starved to death back in the twentieth century. You're always passing out typical layman-type misinformation. Allow me to give you the straight dope."

"Please do," Laura said.

"Protine isn't a natural algae. It's a mutant that started out in culture tanks in the Middle East and gradually crept onto a variety of fresh-water surfaces."

"I know that. When I go into the bathroom in the morning don't I find the darn stuff growing all over the wash basin and the pipes and in the tub and in the—fixture?"

"It also grows over the Great Lakes," Al said scientifically.

"Well, this isn't protine," Laura said to Ted. "This is a real beef roast, real spring potatoes and green peas and white rolls."

“You two are living better than when I last saw you,” Benteley said. “What happened?”

A complex look crossed Laura’s dainty face. “Didn’t you hear? Al jumped a whole class. He beat the Government Quiz; he and I studied together every night after he got home from work.”

“I never heard of anybody beating the Quizzes. Was it mentioned on tv?”

“As a matter of fact it was.” Laura frowned resentfully. “That awful Sam Oster talked about it the whole length of a program. He’s that rabble-rouser who has such a big following among the unks.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know him,” Benteley admitted.

On the tv, glorious ads played back and forth like liquid fire. One after another they rose, hung for an instant, and then dropped away. Ads were the highest art-form; the finest creative talent was at work behind them. Ads combined color, balance, rhythm, and a restless aliveness that pulsed from the screen and into the cozy Davis living room. From hidden hi-fi speakers mounted within the walls random combinations of accompanying sound drifted.

“The Convention,” Davis said, indicating the screen. “They’re advertising for applicants and giving quite a bonus.”

A vortex of foaming light and color-texture lapping across the screen symbolized the Challenge Convention. The billowing mass broke apart, held, and reformed in new combinations. A pattern of unusually excited spheres danced their way across, and the accompanying music rose to a fever pitch.

“What’s it saying?” Benteley asked.

“I can switch to the l-Channel, if you want. Then you’ll have it straight.”

Laura hurried in with silver and china for the table. “Don’t put that l-Channel on; all the unks watch that. That’s why they have it both ways, this for us and the literal for them.”

“You’re wrong, honey,” Al said seriously. “The l-Channel is for news and factual information. The s-Channel is for pleasure. I enjoy

watching it this way, but—" He waved his hand and the circuit switched abruptly. The vivid swirls of color and sound winked out. In their place the placid features of the Westinghouse news announcer appeared. "Here's the same thing."

Laura set the table and returned to the kitchen in a flurry of activity. The living room was friendly and comfortable. One wall was transparent; below the house stretched out the city of Berlin clustered around the Farben Hill, a vast towering center cone, black against the night sky. Bits of cold light drifted and rushed in the gloom: surface cars dancing like yellow sparks in the chill night shadows, disappearing into the vast cone like incandescent moths into the chimney of a cosmic lamp.

"How long have you been in fealty to Verrick?" Benteley asked Al Davis.

Al tore himself away from the tv screen; it was now describing new experiments in C-plus reactors. "What's that, Ted? I guess about three or four years."

"You're satisfied?"

"Sure, why not?" Al gestured around the pleasant, well-furnished living room. "Who wouldn't be satisfied?"

"I'm not talking about this. I had the same thing over at Oiseau-Lyre; most classified people have set-ups like this. I'm talking about Verrick."

Al Davis struggled to catch Benteley's drift. "I never see Verrick. He's been at Batavia, up until today."

"You knew I'd sworn in to Verrick?"

"You told me this afternoon." Davis' kindly face beamed up at Benteley, relaxed and untroubled. "I hope that means you'll be moving over here."

"Why?"

Davis blinked. "Well, because then we'll see more of you and Julie."

“I haven’t been living with Julie for six months,” Benteley said impatiently. “That’s all off. She’s on Jupiter as some sort of work-camp official.”

“Well, I didn’t know. I haven’t seen you for a couple of years. I was as surprised as hell to see your face on the ipvic.”

“I came over with Verrick and his staff.” Benteley’s voice hardened with irony. “When Oiseau-Lyre released me I headed directly for Batavia. I wanted to get out of the Hill system once and for all. I went straight to Reese Verrick.”

“You did the right thing.”

“Verrick tricked me! He was quacked, out of the Directorate completely. I knew somebody was bidding up the Hills, somebody with plenty of funds. I wanted nothing to do with it—and now look.” Benteley’s resentment increased. “Instead of getting away from it, I’m where it’s dirtiest. It’s the last place on Earth I wanted to be.”

Indignation crept into Davis’ tolerant face. “Some of the nicest people I know are Verrick’s serfs.”

“They’re people who don’t care how they make their money.”

“You want to penalize Verrick because he’s a success? He’s made this Hill *run.* Is it his fault nobody else can operate like he can? There’s a natural selection and evolution. Those who can’t survive fall by the way.”

“Verrick fired our research labs.”

“Our? Say, you’re with Verrick, now.” Davis’ indignation boiled over. “That’s a hell of a way to talk! Verrick is your protector and you’re standing here—”

“All right, boys,” Laura exclaimed, cheeks flushed with domestic prowess. “Dinner’s on the table, and I want you to go get some chairs for us to sit on. Al, you wash your hands before we eat. And put on your shoes.”

“Sure, honey,” Davis said obediently, getting to his feet.

“Can I help?” Benteley asked.

“Just find yourself a chair and sit down. We have real coffee. Do you take cream? I can’t remember.”

“Yes,” Benteley said. “Thanks.” He pulled up a couple of chairs and sat down moodily.

“Don’t look so sad,” Laura said to him. “See what you’re getting to eat. Aren’t you living with Julie any more? I’ll bet you eat out all the time, at restaurants where they serve that awful protine stuff.”

Benteley toyed with his knife and fork. “You have a nice place here,” he said presently. “When I saw you last you were living in a Hill dorm. But you weren’t married then.”

“Remember when you and I were living together?” Laura began cutting the twine that held the rolled-roast together.

“That wasn’t more than a month, as I remember.”

“A little under a month,” Benteley agreed, remembering back. He relaxed somewhat, thawed by the smell of hot food, the bright living room, the pretty woman sitting across from him. “That’s when you were still under fealty to Oiseau-Lyre, before you lost your classification.”

Al appeared, sat down, unfolded his napkin, and rubbed his hands together with anticipation. “It sure smells good,” he announced. “Let’s get going; I’m starved.”

While they ate, the tv murmured and spilled out a flickering tide of light into the living room. Benteley listened between conversations, his mind only half on what Laura and Al were saying.

“… Quizmaster Cartwright has announced the dismissal of two hundred Directorate employees,” the announcer was saying. “The reason given is b.s.r.”

“Bad security risk,” Laura murmured, sipping her coffee. “That’s what they always say.”

The announcer continued:

> … Convention plans are booming. Already, hundreds of thousands of applications are flooding the Convention Board and the Westinghouse Hill office. Reese Verrick, the former Quizmaster, has agreed to handle the multiplying technical details in order to set in motion what promises to be the most exciting and spectacular event of the decade …

"You bet," Al said. "Verrick has that Hill under lock. He'll have this thing humming."

"Is old Judge Waring still sitting on the Board?" Laura asked him. "He must be a hundred years old, by now."

"He's still on the Board. He won't resign, not until he's dead. That crusty old fossil! He ought to get out of the way and let somebody younger take over."

"But he knows everything about the Challenge," Laura said. "He's kept it all on a high moral plane. I remember when I was a little girl still in school; that Quizmaster was quacked, that funny one who stuttered. And that good-looking young man got in, that black-haired assassin who made such a wonderful Quizmaster. And old Judge Waring set up the Board and ruled over the Convention like Jehovah in the old Christian myths."

"He has a beard," Benteley said.

"A long white beard."

The tv set had changed announcers. A view of the massive auditorium in which the Convention was being formed swam into focus. Seats were already set up, and the huge platform at which the Board sat in judgment. People milled back and forth; the auditorium boomed and echoed with sounds of furious activity and shouted instructions.

"Just think," Laura said. "All that momentous business going on while we sit here quietly eating our dinner."

"It's a long way off," Al said indifferently.

> … Reese Verrick's offer of a million gold dollars has galvanized the Convention proceedings. Statisticians estimate a record number of

> applications—and they're still pouring in. Everybody is eager to try his hand at the most daring role in the system, the greatest risk and the highest stakes. The eyes of six billion people on nine planets are turned on the Westinghouse Hill tonight. Who will the first assassin be? Out of these many brilliant applicants, representing all classes and Hills, who will be the first to try his hand for the million gold dollars and the applause and acclamation of a whole civilization?

"How about you?" Laura said suddenly to Benteley. "Why don't you put in your application? You don't have an assignment, right now."

"It's out of my line."

Laura laughed. "Make it your line! Al, don't we have that big tape they put out, all the successful assassins of the past, their lives and everything about them? Show it to Ted."

"I've seen it," Benteley said curtly.

"When you were a boy, didn't you dream of growing up to be a successful assassin?" Laura's brown eyes were dim with nostalgia. "I remember how I hated being a girl because then I couldn't be an assassin when I grew up. I bought a lot of charms, but they didn't turn me into a boy."

Al Davis pushed his empty plate away with a gratified belch. "Can I let out my belt?"

"Sure," Laura said.

Al let out his belt. "That was a good meal, honey. I wouldn't mind eating like that every day."

"You do, practically." Laura finished her coffee and daintily touched her napkin to her lips. "More coffee, Ted?"

> … Experts predict that the first assassin will have a seventy-thirty chance of destroying Quizmaster Cart-wright and winning the million dollar prize put up by Reese Verrick, the previous Quizmaster, quacked less than twenty-four hours ago by an unexpected twitch of the bottle. If the first assassin fails, the dopesters have their money sixty-forty on the second assassin. According to

> their scratch sheets Cartwright will have better control over his army and telepathic Corps after the initial two days. For the assassin, speed rather than form will count high, especially in the opening phase. During the last lap the situation will be tight because of …

"There's already a lot of private betting," Laura said. She leaned contentedly back, a cigarette between her fingers, and smiled at Benteley. "It's good to have you come by again. You think you'll move your things here to Farben? You could stay with us for a while, until you find a decent place."

"A lot of places that used to be good are being taken over by unks," Al observed.

"They're moving everywhere," Laura agreed. "Ted, remember that wonderful area near the synthetics research lab? All those new housing units, those green and pink buildings? Unks are living there, and naturally it's all run down and dirty and bad-smelling. It's a disgrace; why don't they sign up for work-camps? That's where they belong, not loafing around here."

Al yawned. "I'm sleepy." He picked a date from the bowl in the center of the table. "A date. What the hell's a date?" He ate it slowly. "Too sweet. What planet's it from? Venus? It tastes like one of those pulpy Venusian fruits."

"It's from Asia Minor," Laura said.

"Here on Earth? Who muted it?"

"Nobody. It's a natural fruit. From a palm tree."

Al shook his head wonderingly. "The infinite diversity of God's creations."

Laura was shocked. "Suppose somebody at work heard you talk like that!"

"Let them hear me." Al stretched and yawned again. "I don't care."

"They might think you were a Christian."

Benteley got slowly to his feet. "Laura, I have to get going."

Al rose in amazement. “Why?”

“I have to collect my things and get them over here from Oiseau-Lyre.”

Al thumped him on the shoulder. “Farben’ll transport them. You’re one of Verrick’s serfs now—remember? Give the Hill traffic office a call and they’ll arrange it. No charge.”

“I’d rather do it myself,” Benteley said.

“Why?” Laura asked, surprised.

“Less things get broken,” Benteley answered obliquely.

“I’ll hire a taxi and load up over the weekend. I don’t think he’ll want me before Monday.”

“I don’t know,” Al said doubtfully. “You better get your stuff over here as soon as possible. Sometimes Verrick wants a person right now, and when he wants you right now—”

“The hell with Verrick,” Benteley said. “I’m taking my time.”

Their dazed, shocked faces danced around him as he moved away from the table. His stomach was full of warm well-cooked food, but his mind was thin and empty, a sharp acid rind over—what? He didn’t know.

“That’s no way to talk,” Al said.

“That’s the way I feel.”

“You know,” Al said, “I don’t think you’re being realistic.”

“Maybe not.” Benteley found his coat. “Thanks for the meal, Laura. It was terrific.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“I’m not,” Benteley answered. “You have a fine little place here. All the comforts and conveniences. I hope you’ll both be very happy. I hope your cooking keeps on convincing you, in spite of me.”

“It will,” Laura said.

The announcer was saying: "… more than ten thousand already, from all parts of Earth. Judge Waring's announcement that the first assassin will be chosen at this session …"

"Tonight!" Al exclaimed. He whistled appreciatively. "Verrick doesn't waste any time." He shook his head, impressed. "That man really moves, Ted. You have to hand it to him."

Benteley crouched down and snapped the tv set off. The rapid procession of sounds and images faded out of existence and he rose to his feet. "You mind?" he said.

"What happened?" Laura faltered. "It went off."

"I turned it off. I'm tired of hearing that goddamn racket. I'm tired of the Convention and everything about it."

There was an uneasy, unnatural silence.

After a moment Al grinned uncertainly. "How about a shot of booze before you go? It'll relax you."

"I'm relaxed," Benteley said. He crossed over to the transparent wall and stood with his back to Laura and Al, gazing gloomily out at the night and the endless winking procession of lights that moved around Farben Hill. In his mind a similar phantasmagoria of shapes and images swirled; he could turn off the tv and opaque the wall, but he couldn't halt the rapid activity in his mind.

"Well," Laura said finally, to no one in particular, "I guess we don't get to watch the Challenge Convention."

"You'll see review tapes the rest of your life," Al said genially.

"I want to see it now!"

"It'll be awhile, anyhow," Al said, automatically seeking to smooth things out. "They're still testing their equipment."

Laura made a short breathing sound and whirled the dinner table back into the kitchen. Roaring water leaped in the sink; dishes banged and scraped furiously.

"She's mad," Al observed.

"It's my fault," Benteley said, without conviction.

“She’ll get over it. You probably remember. Say, if you want to tell me what’s wrong I’m all ears.”

What am I supposed to say? Benteley thought futilely. “I went to Batavia expecting to get in on something big,” he said. “Something beyond people grabbing for power, struggling to get to the top of the heap over each other’s dead bodies. Instead I find myself back here—with that shrill thing yelling at the top of its lungs.” He gestured at the tv. “Those ads are like bright shiny sewer-bugs.”

Al Davis solemnly extended a chubby finger. “Reese Verrick will be back in the number One spot inside a week. His money picks the assassin. The assassin is under fealty to him. When he kills this Cartwright person the spot returns to Verrick. You’re just too damn impatient, that’s all. Wait a week, man. It’ll be back the way it was—maybe better.”

Laura appeared at the doorway. Her rage was gone; now her face was flooded with peevish anxiety. “Al, couldn’t we please get the Convention? I can hear the neighbors’ set and they’re choosing the assassin *right now!*”

“I’ll turn it on,” Benteley said wearily. “I’m going, anyhow.” He squatted down and snapped on the power. The tv set warmed rapidly; as he made his way out onto the front porch, its tinny scream rose in a frenzy behind him. The metallic cheers of thousands rolled out after him, into the chill night darkness.

“The assassin!” the tv set shrieked, as he plunged down the dark path, hands deep in his pockets. “They’re handing up his name right now—I’ll have it for you in a second.” The cheering rose to an orgiastic crescendo; like the rolling waves of the sea, it momentarily blotted the announcer out. “Pellig,” the announcer’s voice filtered through, rising above the tumult. “By popular acclamation—by the wishes of a planet! The assassin is—Keith Pellig!”

FIVE

The burnished wisp of cold gray slid silently in front of Ted Benteley. Its doors rolled back and a slim shape stepped out into the chill night darkness.

"Who is it?" Benteley demanded. The wind lashed through the moist foliage growing against the Davis house. The sky was frigid; far off sounds of activity echoed hollowly, the Farben Hill factories booming dully in the darkness.

"Where in God's name have you been?" a girl's clipped, anxious contralto came to him. "Verrick sent for you an hour ago."

"I was right here," Benteley answered.

Eleanor Stevens emerged quickly from the shadows. "You should have stayed in touch when the ship landed. He's angry." She glanced nervously around. "Where's Davis? Inside?"

"Of course." Anger rose inside Benteley. "What's this all about?"

"Don't get excited." The girl's voice was as taut as the frozen stars shining overhead. "Go back inside and get Davis and his wife. I'll wait for you in the car."

Al Davis gaped at him in amazement as Benteley pushed open the front door and entered the warm yellow-bright living room. "He wants us," Benteley said. "Tell Laura; he wants her along, too."

Laura was sitting on the edge of the bed unstrapping her sandals. She quickly smoothed her slacks down over her ankles as Al entered the bedroom. "Come on, honey," Al said to his wife.

"Is something wrong?" Laura leaped quickly up. "What is it?"

The three of them moved out into the chill night darkness, in greatcoats and heavy workboots. Eleanor started up the motor of the

car and it purred forward restlessly. “In you go,” Al murmured, as he helped Laura find a seat in the inky gloom. “How about a light?”

“You don’t need a light to sit down,” Eleanor answered. She rolled the doors shut; the car glided out onto the road and instantly gained speed. Dark houses and trees flashed past. Abruptly, with a sickening *whoosh*, the car lifted up above the pavement. It skimmed briefly, then arched high over a row of tension lines. A few minutes later it was gaining altitude over the vast sprawling mass of buildings and streets that made up the parasitic clusters around the Farben Hill.

“What’s this all about?” Benteley demanded. The car shuddered, as magnetic grapple-beams caught it and lowered it toward the winking buildings below. “We have a right to know something.”

“We’re going to have a little party,” Eleanor said, with a smile that barely moved her thin crimson lips. She allowed the car to settle into a concave lock and come finally to rest against a magnetic disc. With a quick snap she cut the power and threw open the doors. “Get out. We’re here.”

Their heels clattered in the deserted corridor, as Eleanor led them rapidly from one level to the next. A few silent uniformed guards stood at regular intervals, their pudding faces sleepy and impassive, bulging rifles gripped loosely.

Eleanor waved open a double-sealed door and nodded them briskly inside. A billow of fragrant air lapped around them as they pushed uncertainly past her, inside the chamber.

Reese Verrick stood with his back to them. He was fumbling angrily with something, massive arms moving in a slow grind of rage. “How the hell do you work this damn thing?” he bellowed irritably. The protesting shrill of torn metal grated briefly. “Christ, I think I broke it.”

“Here,” Herb Moore said, emerging from a deep low chair in the corner. “You have no manual dexterity.”

“You bet,” Verrick growled. He turned, a huge hunched-over bear, his shaggy brows protruding bone-hard, thick and belligerent. His

blazing eyes bored at the three newcomers as they stood uneasily together. Eleanor Stevens unzipped her greatcoat and tossed it over the back of a luxurious couch.

“Here they are,” she said to Verrick. “They were all together, enjoying themselves.” She stalked over, long-legged in her velvet slacks and leather sandals and stood before the fire warming her breasts and shoulders. In the flickering firelight her naked flesh glowed a deep luminous red.

Verrick turned without ceremony to Benteley. “Always be where I can find you.” He bit his words out contemptuously.

“I don’t have any more teeps around to thought-wave people in. I have to find them the hard way.” He jerked his thumb at Eleanor. “She came along, but minus ability.”

Eleanor smiled bleakly and said nothing.

Verrick spun around and shouted at Moore, “Is that damn thing fixed or not?”

“It’s almost ready.”

Verrick grunted sourly. “This is a sort of celebration,” he said to Benteley, “although I don’t know what we’ve got to celebrate.”

Moore strolled over, confident and full of talk, a sleek little model of an interplan rocket in his hands. “We’ve got plenty to celebrate. This is the first time a Quizmaster chose an assassin. Pellig isn’t somebody chosen by a bunch of senile old fogies; Verrick has had him on tap and this whole thing worked out since—”

“You talk too much,” Verrick cut in. “You’re too damn full of easy words. Half of them don’t mean a thing.”

Moore laughed gaily. “That’s what the Corps found out.”

Benteley moved uncomfortably away. Verrick was slightly drunk; he was as menacing and ominous as a bear let out of its cage. But behind his clumsy movements was a slick-edged mind that missed nothing.

The chamber was high-ceilinged, done in ancient wood panels, probably from some ancient monastery. The whole structure was

much like a church, domed and ribbed, its upper limits dissolving in amber gloom, thick beams charred and hard-smoked from countless fires roaring in the stone fireplace below. Everything was massive and heavy. There were rich deep colors; the stones themselves were rubbed black with ingrained ash, the upright supports as thick as tree-logs. Benteley touched a dully-gleaming panel. The wood was corroded, but strangely smooth, as if a layer of cloudy light had settled over it and worked its way into the material.

"This wood," Verrick said, noticing Benteley, "is from a medieval bawdy house."

Laura was examining stone-weighted tapestries that hung dead and heavy over the lead-sealed windows. On a mantel over the huge fireplace were battered, dented cups. Benteley gingerly took one down. It was a ponderous lump in his hands, an ancient thick-rimmed cup, heavy and simple and oblique, medieval Saxon.

"You'll meet Pellig in a few minutes," Verrick said to them. "Eleanor and Moore have already met him."

Moore laughed again, his offensive sharp bark, like a thin-toothed dog. "I've met him, all right," he said.

"He's cute," Eleanor said tonelessly.

"Pellig is circulating around," Verrick continued. "Talk to him, stay with him. I want everybody to see him. I only plan to send out one assassin." He waved his hand impatiently. "There's no point in sending out an endless stream."

Eleanor glanced at him sharply.

"Let's lay it on the line and get it over with." Verrick strode to the closed double-doors at the end of the room and waved them open. Sound, rolling volumes of light and the flickering movement of many people billowed out. "Get in there," Verrick ordered. "I'll locate Pellig."

"A drink, sir or madam?"

Eleanor Stevens accepted a glass from the tray passed by a blank-faced MacMillan robot. “What about you?” she said to Benteley. She nodded the robot back and took a second glass. “Try it. It’s smooth stuff. It’s some kind of berry that grows on the sunward side of Callisto, in the cracks of a certain kind of shale, one month out of the year. Verrick has a special work-camp to collect it.”

Benteley took the glass. “Thanks.”

“And cheer up.”

“What’s this all about?” Benteley indicated the packed cavern of murmuring, laughing people. They were all well dressed, in a variety of color combinations; every top-level class was represented. “I expect to hear music and see them start dancing.”

“There was dinner and dancing earlier. Good grief, it’s almost two a.m. A lot has happened, today. The twitch, the Challenge Convention, all the excitement.” Eleanor moved off, eyes intent on something. “Here they come.”

A sudden rustle of nervous silence swept over the nearby people. Benteley turned and so did everyone else. They were all watching nervously, avidly, as Reese Verrick approached. With him was another man. The latter was a slender man in an ordinary gray-green suit, his arms loose at his sides, his face blank and expressionless. A taut ripple of sound swirled after him; there were hushed exclamations and a burst of appreciative tribute.

“That’s him,” Eleanor grated between her white teeth, eyes flashing. She grabbed fiercely at Benteley’s arm. “That’s Pellig. *Look at him.*”

Pellig said nothing. His hair was straw-yellow, moist and limply combed. His features were uncertain, almost non-descript. He was a colorless, silent person almost lost from sight as the rolling giant beside him propelled him among the alertly-watching couples. After a moment the two of them were swallowed up by satin slacks and floor length gowns, and the buzz of animated conversation around Benteley resumed.

“They’ll be over here later,” Eleanor said. She shivered. “He gives me the creeps. Well?” She smiled up quickly at Benteley, still holding on tight to his arm. “What do you think of him?”

“I didn’t get any impression.” Off in the distance Verrick was surrounded by a group of people. Herb Moore’s enthusiastic voice lifted above the uniform blur of sound: he was expounding again. Annoyed, Benteley pulled a few steps away.

“Where are you going?” Eleanor asked.

“Home.” The word slipped out involuntarily.

“Where do you mean?” Eleanor smiled wryly. “I can’t teep you any more, darling. I gave all that up.” She lifted her flaming crimson hair to show the two dead circles above her ears, lead-gray spots that marred the smooth whiteness of her skin.

“I can’t understand you,” Benteley said. “An ability you were born with, a unique gift.”

“You sound like Wakeman. If I had stayed with the Corps I would have had to use my ability against Reese. So what else could I do but leave?” There was tight agony in her eyes. “You know, it’s really gone. It’s like being blinded. I screamed and cried a long time afterward. I couldn’t face it. I broke down completely.”

“How are you now?”

She gestured shakily. “I’ll live. Anyhow, I can’t get it back. So forget it, darling. Drink your drink and relax.” She clinked glasses with him. “It’s called *methane gale.* I suppose Callisto has a methane atmosphere.”

“Have you ever been to one of the colony planets?” Benteley asked. He sipped at the amber liquid; it was strong stuff. “Have you ever seen one of the work-camps, or one of the squatters’ colonies after a police patrol has finished with it?”

“No,” Eleanor said simply. “I’ve never been off Earth. I was born in San Francisco nineteen years ago. All telepaths come from there, remember? During the Final War the big research installations at Livermore were hit by a Soviet missile. Those who survived were

badly bathed. We're all descendants of one family, Earl and Verna Phillips. The whole Corps is related. I was trained for it all the time I was growing up: my destiny."

A vague blur of music had started up at one end of the chamber. A music robot, creating random combinations of sound, harmonic colors and shades that flitted agilely, too subtle to pin down. Some couples started dancing listlessly. A group of men had gathered together and were arguing in loud, angry tones. Snatches of words carried to Benteley.

"Out of the lab in June, they say."

"Would you make a cat wear trousers? It's inhuman."

"Plow into something at that velocity? Personally, I'll stick to plain old sub-C."

Near the double doors a few people were seeking out their wraps and wandering away, dull-faced, vacant-eyed, mouths slack with fatigue and boredom.

"It gets like this," Eleanor said. "The women wander off to the powder room. The men start arguing some point."

"What does Verrick do?"

"You're hearing it now."

Verrick's deep tones rolled out over everybody else's; he was dominating the argument. People nearby gradually stopped talking and began filtering over to listen. A tight knot of men formed, grim-faced and serious, as Verrick and Moore waved louder and hotter.

"Our problems are of our own making," Verrick asserted. "They're not real, like problems of supply and labor surplus."

"How do you figure?" Moore demanded.

"This whole system is artificial. This M-game was invented by a couple of mathematicians during the early phase of the Second World War."

“You mean discovered. They saw that social situations are analogues of strategy games, like poker. A system that works in a poker game will work in a social situation, like business or war.”

“What’s the difference between a game of chance and a strategy game?” Laura Davis asked, from where she and Al stood.

Annoyed, Moore answered, “Everything. In a game of chance no conscious deception is involved; in a poker game every player has a deliberate strategy of bluff, false leads, putting out misleading verbal reports and visual horse-play to confuse the other players as to his real position and intentions. He has a pattern of misrepresentation by which he traps them into acting foolishly.”

“You mean like saying he has a good hand when he hasn’t?”

Moore ignored her and turned back to Verrick. “You want to deny society operates like a strategy game? Minimax was a brilliant hypothesis. It gave us a rational scientific method to crack any strategy and transform the strategy game into a chance game, where the regular statistical methods of the exact sciences function.”

“All the same,” Verrick rumbled, “this damn bottle throws a man out for no reason and elevates an ass, a crackpot, picked at random, without regard to his ability or class.”

“Sure,” Moore exclaimed, wildly excited. “Our whole system is built on Minimax. The bottle forces everybody to play a Minimax game or be squashed; we’re forced to give up deception and adopt a rational procedure.”

“There’s nothing rational in this random twitching,” Verrick answered angrily. “How can random machinery be rational?”

“The random factor is a function of an overall rational pattern. In the face of random twitches, no one can have a strategy. It forces everybody to adopt a randomized method: best analysis of the statistical possibilities of certain events plus the pessimistic assumption that any plans will be found out in advance. Assuming you’re found out in advance frees you of the danger of being discovered. If you act randomly your opponent can find out nothing about you because even *you* don’t know what you’re going to do.”

“So we’re all a bunch of superstitious fools,” Verrick complained. “Everybody’s trying to read signs and harbingers. Everybody’s trying to explain two-headed calves and flocks of white crows. We’re all dependent on random chance; we’re losing control because we can’t plan.”

“How can you plan with teeps around? Teeps perfectly fulfill the pessimistic expectations of Minimax: they find out every strategy. They discover you as soon as you begin playing.”

Verrick pointed to his great barrel chest. “There are no sissy-kissing charms hanging around my neck. No rose petals and ox dung and boiled owl spit. I play a game of skill, not chance and maybe not strategy, when you pin me down. I never did go by a lot of theoretical abstractions. I go by rule of thumb.” He displayed his thumb. “I do what each situation demands. That’s skill. I’ve got it.”

“Skill is a function of chance. It’s an intuitive best-use of chance situations. You’re so goddamn old you’ve been in enough situations to know in advance the pragmatic—”

“What about Pellig? That’s strategy, isn’t it?”

“Strategy involves deception and with Pellig nobody is going to be deceived.”

“Absurd,” Verrick growled. “You’ve been knocking yourself out keeping the Corps from knowing about Pellig.”

“That was your idea.” Moore flushed angrily. “I said then and I say now: let them all know because there’s nothing they can do. If I had my way I’d announce it over tv tomorrow.”

“You goddamn fool,” Verrick rasped. “You certainly would!”

“Pellig is unbeatable.” Moore was furious at being humiliated in front of everybody. “We’ve combined the essence of Minimax. Taking the bottle twitch as my starting point, I’ve evolved a—”

“Shut up, Moore,” Verrick muttered, turning his back. “You talk too much.” He moved a few steps away; people hurriedly stepped aside from him. “This random stuff has got to go. You can’t plan anything with it hanging over your head.”

“That’s why we have it!” Moore shouted after him.

“Then drop it. Get rid of it.”

“Minimax isn’t something you turn on and off. It’s like gravity; it’s a law, a pragmatic law.”

Benteley had moved over to listen. “You believe in natural law?” he demanded. “An 8–8 like you?”

“Who’s this fellow?” Moore snarled, glaring furiously at Benteley. “What’s the idea of butting into our conversation?”

Verrick swelled another foot taller. “This is Ted Benteley. Class 8–8, same as you. We just now took him on.”

Moore blanched. “8–8! We don’t need any more 8–8’s!” His face glowed an ugly yellow. “Benteley? You’re someone Oiseau-Lyre tossed out. A derelict.”

“That’s right,” Benteley said evenly. “And I came directly here.”

“Why?”

“I’m interested in what you’re doing.”

“What I’m doing is none of your business!”

“All right,” Verrick said hoarsely to Moore. “Shut up or get out of here. Benteley’s working with you from now on, whether you like it or not.”

“Nobody gets into the project but me!” Hatred, fear, and professional jealousy blazed on Moore’s face. “If he can’t hang on at a third-rate Hill like Oiseau-Lyre, he isn’t good enough to—”

“We’ll see,” Benteley said coolly. “I’m itching to get my hands on your notes and papers. I’ll enjoy going over your work. It sounds like just what I want.”

“I want a drink,” Verrick muttered. “I’ve got too much to do, to stand here talking.”

Moore shot Benteley a last glance of resentment and then hurried off after Verrick. Their voices trailed off as a door was slammed. The crowd of people shifted and began to murmur wearily and break apart.

With a shade of bitterness Eleanor said, “Well, there goes our host. Quite a party, wasn’t it?”

SIX

Benteley's head had begun to ache. The constant din of voices mixed with the flash of bright clothing and the movements of bodies. The floor was littered with squashed cigarette butts and debris; the whole chamber had a disheveled cast, as if it were slowly settling on its side. His eyes hurt from the glare of the overhead lights that wavered and altered shape and value each moment. A man pushing by jabbed him hard in the ribs. Leaning against the wall, a cigarette dangling between her lips, a young woman was removing her sandals and gratefully rubbing her red-nailed toes.

"What do you want?" Eleanor asked him.

"I want to leave."

Eleanor led him expertly through the drifting groups of people toward one of the exits. Sipping her drink as she walked she said, "All this may seem pointless, but actually it serves a function. Verrick is able to—"

Herb Moore blocked their way. His face was flushed dark and unhealthy red. With him was the pale, silent Keith Pellig. "Here you are," Moore muttered thickly, teetering unsteadily, his glass sloshing over. He focused on Benteley and harshly announced, "You wanted to get in on it." He slammed Pellig on the back. "This is the greatest event in the world. This is the most important person alive. Feast your eyes, Benteley."

Pellig said nothing. He gazed impassively at Benteley and Eleanor, his thin body relaxed and supple. There was almost no color to him. His eyes, his hair, his skin, even his nails, were bleached and translucent. He had a washed hygienic appearance. He was odorless, colorless, tasteless, an empty cipher.

Benteley put out his hand. “Hello, Pellig. Shake.”

Pellig shook. His hand was cool and faintly moist with no life or strength.

“What do you think of him?” Moore demanded aggressively. “Isn’t he something? Isn’t he the greatest discovery since the wheel?”

“Where’s Verrick?” Eleanor said. “Pellig isn’t supposed to be out of his sight.”

Moore flushed darker. “That’s a laugh! Who—”

“You’ve had too much to drink.” Eleanor peered sharply around. “Damn Reese; he’s probably still arguing with somebody.”

Benteley gazed at Pellig with dulled fascination. There was something repellent about the listless, slender shape, a sexless juiceless hermaphrodite quality. Pellig didn’t even have a glass in his hand. He had nothing.

“You’re not drinking,” Benteley’s voice rolled out.

Pellig shook his head.

“Why not? Have some *methane gale.*” Benteley fumbled a glass from the tray of a passing MacMillan robot; three crashed to the floor, spilling and splintering under the robot’s gliding treads. It instantly halted and began an intricate cleaning and sweeping operation.

“Here.” Benteley thrust the glass at Pellig. “Eat, drink, and be merry. Tomorrow somebody, certainly not you, will die.”

“Cut it,” Eleanor grated in his ear.

“Pellig,” Benteley said, “how does it feel to be a professional killer? You don’t look like a professional killer. You don’t look like anything at all. Not even a man. Certainly not a human being.”

The remaining people had begun to collect around. Eleanor tugged furiously at his arm. “Ted, for Christ’s sake! Verrick’s coming!”

“Let go.” Benteley yanked loose. “That’s my sleeve.” He brushed his sleeve with numb fingers. “That’s about all I have left; leave me

that much." He focused on the vacant face of Keith Pellig. There was a constant roaring in his brain; his nose and throat stung. "Pellig, how's it feel to murder a man you never saw? A man who never did anything to you? A harmless crackpot, accidentally in the way of a lot of big people. A temporary bottle-neck—"

"What do you mean?" Moore interrupted in a dangerous mumble of confused resentment. "You mean to imply there's something wrong with Pellig?" He snickered grotesquely. "My pal Pellig."

Verrick appeared from the side room, pushing people out of his way. "Moore, take him out of here. I told you to go upstairs." He waved the group of people brusquely toward the double doors. "The party's over. Get going. You'll be contacted when you're needed."

The people began separating and moving reluctantly toward the exits. Robots found coats and wraps for them. In small groups they lingered here and there, talking together, watching Verrick and Pellig curiously.

Verrick took hold of Pellig. "Get out of here. Go on upstairs. Christ, it's late." He started for the wide staircase, hunched over, his shaggy head turned to one side. "Well, in spite of everything, we've accomplished a lot today. I'm going to bed."

Balancing himself carefully, Benteley said clearly after him, "Look here, Verrick. I have an idea. Why don't you murder Cartwright yourself? Eliminate the middle-man. It's more scientific."

Verrick snorted with unexpected laughter and kept on going, without slowing or looking back. "I'll talk to you tomorrow," he said over his shoulder. "Go home and get some sleep."

"I'm not going home," Benteley said stubbornly. "I came here to learn what the strategy is, and I'm staying until I learn it."

At the first step Verrick halted and turned. There was a queer look on his massive hard-ridged features. "What's that?"

"You heard me," Benteley said. He closed his eyes and stood with his feet apart, balancing himself as the room tilted and shifted.

When he looked again, Verrick had gone up the stairs and Eleanor Stevens was pulling frantically at his arm.

“You damn fool!” she shrilled. “What’s the matter?”

“He’s a creep,” Moore said unsteadily. He moved Pellig toward the stairs. “Better get him out of here, Eleanor. He’ll start chewing up the carpet pretty soon.”

Benteley was baffled. He opened his mouth numbly but no sound came. “He’s gone,” he managed to say finally. “They’re all gone. Verrick and Moore and that thing of wax.”

Eleanor led him out into a side room and closed the door after them. The room was small and in half-shadow, its edges merged in hazy darkness. She shakily lit a cigarette and stood puffing furiously, smoke streaming from her dilated nostrils. “Benteley, you’re a lunatic.”

“I’m drunk. This Callistan beetle-juice. Is it true a thousand slaves are sweating and dying in a methane atmosphere so Verrick can have his whiskey?”

“Sit down.” She pushed him down in a chair and paced in a jerky little circle directly in front of him, taut as a marionette on a wire. “Everything’s going to pieces. Moore is so damn proud of Pellig he can’t stop showing him off. Verrick can’t adjust to being quacked; he thinks he still has his teeps to hold him together. Oh, God.” She spun on her heel and buried her face bitterly in her hands.

Benteley gazed up at her without comprehension until she had hold of herself again and was dabbing miserably at her swollen eyes. “Can I do something?” he asked hopefully.

Eleanor found a decanter of cold water on a low table in the shadows. She emptied a shallow glazed-china dish of petite hard candies over one of the chairs and filled the dish with water. Very rapidly she doused her face, hands and arms, then yanked down an embroidered cloth from the window case and dried herself.

“Come on, Benteley,” she muttered. “Let’s get out of here.” She started blindly from the room, and Benteley struggled to his feet and

after her. Her small bare-breasted shape glided like a phantom between the gloomy objects that made up Verrick's possessions, huge ponderous statues and glass cases, up short dark-carpeted stairs and around corners where immobile robot servants stood waiting silently for instructions.

They came out on a deserted floor, draped in shadows and dust-thick darkness. Eleanor waited for him to catch up with her. "I'm going to bed," she said bluntly. "You can come if you want, or you can go home."

"My home's gone. I have no home." He followed after her, down a corridor past a series of half-closed doors. Lights showed here and there. He heard voices. He thought he recognized some of them. Men's voices mixed with sleepy, half-swallowed women's murmur. Abruptly Eleanor vanished and he was alone.

He felt his way through a haze of remote movement and wavering shapes. Once he crashed violently against something. A hail of shattered objects cascaded down around him. Stunned, he blundered off away again and stood foolishly.

"What are you doing here?" a hard voice demanded. It was Herb Moore, someplace close by. His face flickered and rose, illuminated like a spectre's, without sound or support. "You don't belong here!" The voice mushroomed until it and the flushed, puffy face filled his vision. "Get the hell out of here! Go where you belong, you third-rate derelict. Class 8–8? Don't make me laugh. Who said you—"

Benteley smashed Moore. The face crumpled and spurted liquid and fragments, utterly destroyed. Something slammed into him and he was bowled over. Choked and imprisoned by a rolling, slobbering mass, he fought his way upward, struggling to catch hold of something solid.

"Pipe down," Eleanor whispered urgently. "Both of you, for God's sake! Be quiet."

Benteley became inert. Beside him Moore puffed and panted and wiped at his bleeding face. "I'll kill you, you creep bastard." Sobbing with pain and rage he bellowed, "You'll be sorry you hit me!"

The next thing he knew he was sitting on something low, bending down and fumbling for his shoes. His coat was lying on the floor in front of him. Then his shoes lay lifeless, separated from each other by an expanse of luxurious carpet. There was no sound; the room was utterly silent and cold. A dim light flickered off in a distant corner.

“Lock the door,” Eleanor’s voice came from nearby. “I think Moore’s gone off his rocker or something. He’s out there in the hall shambling around like a berserker.”

Benteley found the door and locked its old-fashioned manual bolt. Eleanor was standing in the center of the room, one leg pulled up, foot thrust behind her, carefully unlacing the thongs of her sandals. As Benteley watched in dazed silence, awed and astonished, she kicked off her sandals, unzipped her slacks, and stepped from them. For a moment bare ankles gleamed in the lamplight. Pale, shimmering calves; the sight danced in front of him until, overcome, he closed his eyes tight. The slim lines, small-boned, delicate perfectly smooth legs, all the way up to her knees, at which point her undergarment began …

Then he was stumbling his way down, and she was reaching up for him. Moist arms, quivering breasts and dark red nipples full and solid under him. She gasped and shuddered and locked her arms around him. The roaring in his head boiled up and over; he closed his eyes and peacefully allowed himself to sink down into the torrent.

Much later he awoke. The room was deathly cold. Nothing stirred. There was no sound, no life. He struggled stiffly up, bewildered, his mind broken in vague fragments. Through the open window gray early-morning light filtered, and a cold ominous wind whipped icily around him. He backed away, halted, tried to collect himself.

Figures lay sprawled out, mixed with disordered clothing and covers, in heaps here and there. He stumbled between outstretched

limbs, half-covered arms, stark-white legs that shocked and horrified him. He distinguished Eleanor, lying against the wall, on her side, one arm thrust out, thin fingers curled, legs drawn up under her, breathing restlessly between half-parted lips. He wandered on—and stopped dead.

The gray light filtered over another face and figure, his old friend Al Davis, peaceful and content in the arms of his soundly sleeping wife. The two of them were pressed tight together, both oblivious to everything else.

A little further on were more persons, some of them snoring dully, one stirring into fitful wakefulness. Another groaned and groped feebly for some covering. His foot crushed a glass; splinters and a pool of dark liquid leaked out. Another face ahead was familiar. Who was it? A man, dark-haired, good features …

It was his own face!

He stumbled against a door and found himself in a yellow-lit hall. Terror seized him and he began running blindly. Silently, his bare feet carried him down vast carpeted corridors, endless and deserted, past stone-gray windows, up noiseless flights of steps that never seemed to end. He blundered wildly around a corner and found himself caught in an alcove, a full-length mirror rising up ahead of him, blocking his way.

A wavering figure hovered within the mirror. An empty, lifeless insect-thing caught momentarily, suspended in the yellowed, watery depths. He gazed mutely at it, at the waxen hair, the vapid mouth and lips, the colorless eyes. Arms limp and boneless at its sides; a spineless, bleached thing that blinked vacantly back at him, without sound or motion.

He screamed—and the image winked out. He plunged on along the gray-lit corridors, feet barely skimming the dust-thick carpets. He felt nothing under him. He was rising, carried upward by his great terror, a screaming, streaking thing that hurtled toward the high-domed roof above.

Arms out, he shot soundlessly, through walls and panels, in and out of empty rooms, down deserted passages, a blinded, terrorized thing that flashed and wheeled desperately, beat against lead-sealed windows in desperate, futile efforts to escape.

With a violent crash he struck stunningly against a brick fireplace, Broken, cracked, he fluttered helplessly down to the soft dust-heavy carpet. For a moment he lay bewildered, and then he was stumbling on, hurrying frantically, mindlessly, hurrying anywhere, hands in front of his face, eyes closed, mouth open.

There were sounds ahead. A glowing yellow light filtered through a half-opened doorway. In a room a handful of men were sitting around a table spilled over with tapes and reports. An atronic bulb burned in the center, a warm, unwavering miniature sun that pulled him hypnotically. Surrounded with coffee cups were writers, the men murmuring and poring over their work. There was one huge heavy-set man with massive, sloping shoulders.

“Verrick!” he shouted at the man. His voice came out thin and tiny, a feeble, fluttering insect-voice. “Verrick, help me!”

Reese Verrick glanced up angrily. “What do you want? I’m busy. This has to be done before we can begin moving.”

“Verrick!” he screamed, pulsing with terror and mindless panic. “*Who am I?”*

“You’re Keith Pellig,” Verrick answered irritably, wiping his forehead with one immense paw and pushing his tapes away. “You’re the assassin picked by the Convention. You have to be ready to go to work in less than two hours. You have a job to do.”

SEVEN

Eleanor Stevens appeared from the gray-shadowed hall. “Verrick, this isn’t Keith Pellig. Get Moore down here and make him talk. He’s getting back at Benteley; they had a fight.”

Verrick’s eyes widened. “This is Benteley? That goddamn Moore! He has no sense; this’ll foul up things.”

Benteley was beginning to get back some sanity. “Can this be fixed?” he muttered.

“He was out cold,” Eleanor said in a thin clipped voice. She had pulled on her slacks and sandals and thrown a greatcoat over her shoulders. Her face was colorless; her deep red hair was stringy and vapid. “He can’t go through with it in a conscious condition. Get one of the lab doctors in here to black him. And don’t dry to utilize this. Put him back before you say anything to him. He can’t take it now, you understand?”

Moore appeared, shaken and afraid. “There’s no harm done. I jumped the gun a little, that’s all.” He caught hold of Benteley’s arm. “Come along. We’ll get this straightened around right away.”

Benteley pulled loose. He retreated from Moore and examined his alien hands and face. “Verrick,” his voice said, thin and empty. “Help me.”

“We’ll fix it up,” Verrick said gruffly. “It’ll be all right. Here’s the doctor now.”

Both Verrick and the doctor had hold of him. Herb Moore fluttered a few paces off, afraid to come near Verrick. At the desk Eleanor wearily lit a cigarette and stood smoking, as the doctor inserted the needle in Benteley’s arm and squashed the bulb. As

darkness dissolved him, he heard Verrick's heavy voice dim and recede.

"You should have killed him or let him alone; not this kind of stuff. You think he's going to forget this?"

Moore answered something, but Benteley didn't hear. The darkness had become complete, and he was in it.

A long way off Eleanor Stevens was saying, "You know, Reese doesn't really understand what Pellig is. Have you noticed that?"

"He doesn't understand any kind of theory." Moore's voice, sullen and resentful.

"He doesn't have to understand theory. Why should he, when he can hire infinite numbers of bright young men to understand it for him?"

"I suppose you mean me."

"Why are you with Reese? You don't like him. You don't get along with him."

"Verrick has money to invest in my kind of work. If he didn't back it, I'd be out of luck."

"When it's all over, Reese gets the output."

"That's not important. Look, I took MacMillan's papers, all that basic stuff he did on robots. What ever came of that? Just these witless hulks, glorified vacuum cleaners, stoves, dumbwaiters. MacMillan had the wrong idea. All he wanted was something big and strong to lift things, so the unks could lie down and sleep. So there wouldn't be any more unk servants and laborers. MacMillan was pro-unk. He probably bought his classification on the black market."

There was the sound of movement: People stirring, getting up and walking, the clink of a glass.

"Scotch and water," Eleanor said.

There was the sound of sitting down. A man sighed gratefully. “I’m tired. What a night. I’m going to turn in early. A whole day gone to waste.”

“It was your fault.”

“He’ll keep. He’ll be there for good old Keith Pellig.”

“You’re not going to go over the implementation, not in your condition.”

Moore’s voice was full of outrage. “He’s mine, isn’t he?”

“He belongs to the world,” Eleanor said icily. “You’re so wrapped up in your verbal chess-games, you can’t see the danger you’re putting us in. Every hour that crackpot has gives him a better chance of survival. If you hadn’t gone berserk and turned everything on its head to pay off a personal grudge, Cartwright might already be dead.”

It was evening.

Benteley stirred. He sat up a little, surprised to find himself strong and clear-headed. The room was in semi-darkness. A single light gleamed, a tiny glowing dot that he identified as Eleanor’s cigarette. Moore sat beside her, legs crossed, a whiskey glass in his hand, face moody and remote. Eleanor stood up quickly and turned on a table lamp. “Ted?”

“What time is it?” Benteley demanded.

“Eight-thirty.” She came over to the bed, hands in her pockets. “How are you feeling?”

He swung his legs shakily onto the floor. They had wrapped him in a standard nightrobe; his clothes were nowhere in sight. “I’m hungry,” he said. Suddenly he clenched his fists and struck wildly at his face.

“It’s you,” Eleanor said, matter-of-fact.

Benteley’s legs wobbled under him as he stood unsteadily. “I’m glad of that. It really happened?”

“It happened.” She reached around to find her cigarette.

“It’ll happen again, too. But next time you’ll be prepared. You, and twenty-three other bright young men.”

“Where are my clothes?”

“Why?”

“I’m getting out of here.”

Moore got up quickly. “You can’t walk out; face facts. You discovered what Pellig is—you think Verrick would turn you loose?”

“You’re violating the Challenge Convention rules.” Benteley found his clothes in a side closet and spread them out on the bed. “You can only send one assassin at a time. This thing of yours is rigged so it looks like one, but—”

“Not so fast,” Moore said. “You haven’t got it quite doped out.”

Benteley unfastened his nightrobe and tossed it away. “This Pellig is nothing but a synthetic.”

“Right.”

“Pellig is a vehicle. You’re going to slam a dozen high-grade minds into it and head it for Batavia. Cartwright will be dead, you’ll incinerate the Pellig-thing, and nobody’ll know. You’ll pay off your minds and send them back to their workbenches. Like me.”

Moore was amused. “I wish we could do that. As a matter of fact, we gave it a try. We jammed three personalities into Pellig at once. The results were chaos. Each took off in a different direction.”

“Does Pellig have any personality?” Benteley asked, as he dressed. “What happens when all the minds are out?”

“Pellig becomes what we call vegetable. He doesn’t die, but he devolves to a primitive level of existence. The body processes continue; it’s a kind of twilight sleep.”

“What kept him going last night at the party?”

“A bureaucrat from my lab. A negative type like what you saw; the personality comes across about the same. Pellig is a good medium: not too much distortion or refraction.”

Benteley veered away from the memory as he said, “When I was in it, I thought Pellig was there with me.”

“I felt the same way,” Eleanor agreed calmly. “The first time I tried it I felt as if there was a snake in my slacks. It’s an illusion. When did you first feel it?”

“When I looked in the mirror.”

“Try not looking in the mirror. How do you think *I* felt? At least you’re a male. It was a little too tough on me; I don’t think Moore should try women operators. Too high a shock value.”

“You don’t jam them in without warning, do you?”

“We’ve built up a trained crew,” Moore said. “Over the last few months we’ve tried out dozens of people. Most of them crack. A couple of hours and they get a weird sort of claustrophobia. They want to get away from it, like Eleanor says, as if it’s something slimy and dirty close to them.” He shrugged. “I don’t feel that way. I think he’s beautiful.”

“How many have you got?” Benteley asked.

“We’ve got a couple dozen who can stand it. Your friend Davis is one. He has the right personality: placid, calm, easygoing.”

Benteley tightened. “So this is his new classification. That he beat the Quiz at.”

“Everybody goes up a notch for this. Bought off the black market, of course. You’re in on it, according to Verrick. It’s not as risky as it sounds. If something goes creeper, if they start popping at Pellig, whoever’s in there at the moment will be withdrawn.”

“So that’s the method,” Benteley said, half to himself. “Successive.”

“Let’s see them prove a Challenge violation,” Moore said spiritedly. “We’ve had our legal staff going over all the where-fores and aforesaids. There’s nothing they can get us on. The law specifies one assassin at a time, chosen by public Convention. Keith Pellig was chosen by public Convention, and there won’t be more than one of him.”

“I don’t see what purpose it serves.”

“You will,” Eleanor said. “Moore has a long story that goes with it.”

“After I’ve eaten,” Benteley said.

The three of them walked slowly along the thick-carpeted hall toward the dining room. Benteley froze at the doorway; there was Pellig sitting placidly at Verrick’s table, a plate of veal cutlets and mashed potatoes in front of him, a glass of water at his pale, bloodless lips.

“What’s wrong?” Eleanor asked.

“Who’s in it?”

Eleanor shrugged indifferently. “One of the lab technicians. We keep somebody in it all the time; the more familiar we are with it the better chance we’ll have.”

Benteley moved toward the far end from Pellig. Its waxen pallor made him uncomfortable; it was like some insect newly out of its shell, not yet hardened and dried by the sun.

And then it came back to him.

“Listen,” he said huskily. “There’s something more.”

Moore and Eleanor Stevens glanced sharply at each other. “Take it easy, Benteley,” Moore said.

“The flying. I left the ground. And I wasn’t just running.” His voice rose fearfully. “Something happened to me. On and on, like a ghost. Until the fireplace.” He rubbed his forehead, but there was no bump, no scar.

Of course not. It was another body.

“Explain,” he demanded hoarsely. “What happened to me?”

“Something to do with the lighter weight,” Moore said. “The body’s more efficient than a natural human body.”

Benteley's face must have showed his disbelief, because Eleanor put in, "Pellig may have accepted a drug-cocktail before you entered the body. They were passing them out; I saw some of the women take them."

Verrick's gruff voice interrupted them. "Moore, you're good at abstract questions." He pushed a heap of metalfoil across to Moore's place. "I've been studying our confidential report-tapes on this crackpot Cartwright. There's nothing to him of importance, but I'm worried."

"Why?" Moore asked, as he took his seat.

"First of all, he had his p-card. That's unusual, for an unk. The chance of any one p-card coming up in a person's lifetime is so microscopically small, so utterly worthless—"

"There's always the statistical possibility."

Verrick snorted scornfully. "The bottle is the biggest racket ever thought up. The damn thing's a lottery and everybody alive holds a ticket. Why keep a card that gives you one chance in six billion, a chance that'll never come? The unks are smart enough to peddle their cards, if they're not taken from them by their Hills. What's a card worth these days?"

"About two bucks. Used to be more."

"All right. But this Cartwright keeps his. And that isn't all."

A cunning look spread over Verrick's massive face. "According to my reports, Cartwright purchased—not sold—at least half a dozen p-cards within the last month."

Moore sat up straight. "Really?"

"Maybe," Eleanor said thoughtfully, "Cartwright finally found a charm that works."

Verrick roared like a gored ox. "Quack that talk! Those damn fool miserable charms." He jabbed a furious finger at the girl's bare breasts. "What's that, you have one of those little bags of eye of newt hanging there? Take it off and throw it away. It's a waste of time."

Eleanor smiled gently; everybody was used to Verrick's eccentricity, his disbelief in good-luck charms.

"What else?" Moore demanded. "You have more information?"

"The day the bottle twitched, there was a meeting of the Preston Society." Verrick's knuckles were white. "Maybe he's got what I was after. What everybody's after—a way to beat the bottle. A dope-sheet to plot out its future moves. If I thought Cartwright was sitting there that day waiting for notification to come …"

"What would you do?" Eleanor asked.

Verrick was silent. A strange twisted grimace knifed over his features, an agonized stir that surprised Benteley and made the others halt rigid. Abruptly, Verrick turned his attention to his plate of food, and the others quickly did the same.

When they were through eating, Verrick pushed back his coffee cup and lit a cigar. "Now listen," he said to Benteley. "You said you wanted to know our strategy; here it is. Once a teep locks minds with the assassin he has him. The Corps never lets the assassin break off; he's passed from one to the next all along the multiple rings. They know exactly what he's going to do as soon as he thinks of it. No strategy works; he's teeped constantly, right up to the moment they get bored and pop out his gizzard."

"That's why teeps forced us to take up Minimax," Moore put in. "You can't have a strategy against telepaths: you have to act randomly. You have to not know what you're going to do next. You have to shut your eyes and run blindly. The problem is: how can you randomize your strategy, yet move purposefully toward your goal?"

"Assassins in the past," Verrick continued," tried to find ways of making random decisions. Plimp helped them. Essentially, plimp is assassin-practice. The pocket boards turn up random combinations by which any complexity of decisions can be made. The assassin threw on his board, read the number, and acted according to a prearranged agreement. The teep wouldn't know in advance what the board was going to show, any more than the assassin would.

“But that wasn’t good enough. The assassin played this damn M-game but he still lost. He lost because the teeps were playing it, too, and there were eighty of them and only one of him. He got squeezed out statistically, except once in a long while. Assassins have occasionally got in. DeFalla made it by opening Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* at random and making some kind of complicated utilization of the material presented.”

“Pellig is obviously the answer,” Moore burst in. “We have twenty-four different minds. There’ll be no contact between them. Each of the twenty-four sits in a different cube here at Farben. Each is hooked to the implementation machinery. At random intervals we switch in a different mind—picked at random. Each mind has a fully developed strategy. But nobody knows which mind is coming up next, or when. Nobody knows which strategy, which pattern of action, is about to start. The teeps won’t know from one minute to the next what the Pellig body is going to do.”

Benteley felt a chill of admiration for this ruthless, superlogical technician. “Not bad,” he admitted.

“You see,” Moore said proudly, “Pellig is Heisenberg’s random particle. The teeps can trace his path: directly to Cartwright. But not his velocity. Where Keith Pellig will be along that path at a given moment nobody knows.”

EIGHT

Eleanor Stevens' apartment was a series of attractive rooms in the classified living quarters of the Farben Hill. Benteley gazed around appreciatively, as Eleanor closed the door and moved around turning on lights and straightening things.

"I just moved in," she explained. "It's a mess."

"Where's Moore?"

"Somewhere in the building, I suppose."

"I thought you were living with him."

"Not now." Eleanor lowered the translucent filter over the view-wall of the apartment. The night sky with its cold host of stars, the glittering sparks and shapes that made up the Hill, dimmed and faded. Eleanor glanced at him sideways, a little embarrassed, and said, "To tell you the truth, I'm not living with anybody right now."

"I'm sorry," Benteley said awkwardly. "I didn't know."

Eleanor shrugged and smiled bright-eyed, red lips twitching. "It's a heck of a thing, isn't it? After I lived with Moore, I lived with one of the other research technicians, a friend of his, and then somebody in the planning board. I was a teep, remember? A lot of non-teeps won't live with a teep, and I never got along with the Corps."

"That's over with now."

"It sure is." She strolled around the room, hands deep in her pockets, suddenly solemn and thoughtful. "I guess I've wasted my life. I never saw anything in being telepathic; it meant I had to be trained for the Corps or submit to a removal probe. I signed up to keep out of the work-camps … I don't have a classification. Did you know that? If Verrick drops me, that's the end. I can't go back to the

Corps and I can't really do anything to beat the Quiz." She glanced appealingly at Benteley. "Do you think differently about me because I'm unattached?"

"Not at all."

"I feel so damn funny, loose like this." She gestured tensely. "I'm completely cut off. On my own. This is a terrible ordeal for me, Ted. I had to go with Verrick; he's the only man I've ever felt completely safe with. But it cut me off from my family." She gazed up at him pathetically. "I hate being alone. I get so frightened."

"Don't get frightened. Spit in their eye."

Eleanor shuddered. "I couldn't do that. How can you live like that? You've got to have people you can depend on, somebody strong, somebody to take care of you. This is a big frigid world, completely bleak and hostile and empty of warmth. You know what happens to you if you let go and fall?"

"I know." He nodded. "They pack them off by the million."

"I'd stay with the Corps, I guess. But I hate the Corps. Prying, listening, always knowing what's going on in your mind. You don't really live, not as a separate individual. You're a sort of collective organism. You can't really love, you can't really hate. All you have is your job. Even that isn't yours. You share it with eighty other people, people like Wakeman."

"You want to be alone but you're afraid," Benteley said.

"I want to be *me!* I don't want to be alone. I hate waking up in the morning and finding nobody beside me. I hate coming home to an empty apartment. Dinner alone, cooking and keeping the place fixed up for myself. Turning on the lights at night, pulling down the shades. Watching tv. Just sitting. Thinking."

"You're young. You'll get used to it."

"I'm not going to get used to it!" She brightened. "Of course, I've done better than some." She tossed her flame-red mane of hair and her eyes clouded, green and luxurious and cunning. "I've lived with a lot of men, since I was sixteen. I can't remember how many; I

meet them the way I met you, at work or at parties, sometimes through friends. We live together awhile, and then we quarrel. Something always goes wrong; it never lasts." Her terror shivered back, violent and overwhelming. "They leave! They stay around awhile and then they take off, they let me down. Or they … throw me out."

"It happens," Benteley said. He hardly heard her; he was thinking his own thoughts.

"I'll find the one, someday," Eleanor said fervently. "Won't I? And I'm only nineteen. Haven't I done all right for nineteen? That's not very long. And Verrick's my protector: I can always depend on him."

Benteley roused himself. "Are you asking me to live with you?"

Eleanor blushed. "Well, would you mind?"

He didn't answer.

"What's the matter?" she asked quickly, hurt-eyed and urgent.

"Nothing to do with you." Benteley turned his back to her and wandered over to the translucent view-wall. He restored it to transparency. "The Hill looks pretty at night," he said, gazing moodily out. "You wouldn't know, to look at it now, what it really is."

"Forget the Hill!" Eleanor snapped the gray mist back. "It isn't me? Then it's Verrick. I know—it's Reese Verrick. Oh, God. You were so eager that day, when you came bursting into the office with your briefcase clutched like a chastity belt." She smiled a little. "You were so excited. Like a Christian finally getting into heaven. You had waited so long … you expected so much. There was something terribly appealing about you. I hoped to see you around."

"I wanted to get out of the Hill system. I wanted to get to something better. To the Directorate."

"The Directorate!" Eleanor laughed. "What's that? An abstraction! What do you think makes up the Directorate?" She breathed rapidly, eyes wide, pulse throbbing. "It's people who are real, not institutions and offices. How can you be loyal to a—thing? New men

come in, the old ones die, faces change. Does your loyalty remain? Why? To what? Superstition! You're loyal to a word, a name. Not to a living entity of flesh and blood."

"There's more than that," Benteley said. "It isn't just offices and desks. It represents something."

"What does it represent?"

"It stands above all of us. It's bigger than any man or any group of men. Yet, in a way it's everybody."

"It's nobody. When you have a friend he's a particular person, not a class or a work-group, isn't he? You don't have class 4–7 as your friend, do you? When you go to bed with a woman, it's a particular woman, isn't it? Everything else in the universe has collapsed … shifting, random, purposeless gray smoke you can't put your hands on. The only thing that's left is people; your family, your friends, your mistress, your protector. You can touch them, be close to them … breathing *life* that's warm and solid. Perspiration, skin and hair, saliva, breath, bodies. Taste, touch, smell, colors. Good God, there has to be something you can grab hold of! What is there, beyond people? What is there you can depend on besides your protector?"

"Depend on yourself."

"Reese takes care of me! He's big and strong."

"He's your father," Benteley said. "And I hate fathers."

"You're—psychotic. There's something wrong with you."

"I know," Benteley agreed. "I'm a sick man. And the more I see, the sicker I get. I'm so sick I think everybody else is sick and I'm the only healthy person. That's pretty bad off, isn't it?"

"Yes," Eleanor said breathlessly.

"I'd like to pull this whole thing down with a big loud crash. But I don't have to; it's collapsing by itself. Everything is thin and empty and metallic. Games, lotteries—a bright kid's toy! All that holds it together is the oath. Positions for sale, cynicism, luxury and poverty, indifference … noisy tv sets shrilling away. A man goes out to murder another man and everybody claps their hands and watches.

What do we believe in? What do we have? Brilliant criminals working for powerful criminals. Loyalty we swear away to plastic busts."

"The bust is a symbol. And it's not for sale. That's one thing you can't buy and sell." Her green eyes flashed triumphantly. "You know that, Ted. It's the most precious thing we have. Loyalty between us, between protector and serf, between a man and his mistress."

"Maybe," Benteley said slowly, "a person should be loyal to an ideal."

"An ideal what?"

Benteley's mind refused to turn out an answer. The wheels, the gears and rods, were stuck. Unfamiliar, incomprehensible thoughts were crowding in, unwanted and unasked-for, throwing the mechanism into grinding uncertainty. Where had the torrent come from? He didn't know. "That's all we have left," he said finally. "Our oaths. Our loyalty. That's the cement that keeps this whole thing from collapsing. And what's it worth? How good is it? Not much good. It's crumbling away while we stand here."

Eleanor gasped. "It isn't!"

"Is Moore loyal to Verrick?"

"No! That's why I left him. Him and his theories. That's all he's loyal to, them and Herb Moore." Her good-luck charms danced furiously. "I loathe that!"

"Verrick isn't loyal," Benteley said carefully. He tried to measure the girl's reaction; her face was stunned and colorless. "It isn't Moore; don't blame him. He's out for what he can get. So is everybody else. So is Reese Verrick. Any one of them would throw away his oath to get hold of a little more loot, a little more pull. It's one big scramble for the top. They're all struggling to get up there—and nothing is going to stand in their way. When all the cards are turned up, you'll see how little loyalty counts."

"Verrick would never break his oath! He wouldn't let down the people depending on him!"

“He already has. He broke a moral code when he let me swear on. You were mixed up with it; you knew. I took my oath in good faith.”

“Oh, God,” Eleanor said wearily. “You’ll never forget that, will you? You’re angry because you think you were made a fool of.”

“It’s more than that; don’t kid yourself. It’s the whole weak miserable structure showing through. You’ll find out, someday. I know now; I’m all prepared. What else can you expect in a society of games and quizzes and assassination?”

“Don’t blame Verrick. The Challenge was set up years ago when the whole bottle system, the whole M-game, was worked out and set into motion.”

“Verrick’s not even playing the M-game square. He’s trying to beat it with this Pellig strategy.”

“It’ll work, won’t it?”

“Probably.”

“Well, then what are you complaining about? Isn’t that what’s important?” Eleanor grabbed his arm fiercely. “Come on, forget it. You worry too damn much. Moore talks too much and you worry too much. Enjoy yourself—tomorrow’s the big day.”

She poured drinks and brought Benteley his. He sat sipping moodily, Eleanor beside him on the couch. In the half-light of the apartment the girl’s crimson hair glowed and sparkled. She had drawn her legs up under her. Above each ear the lead-gray spot had faded slightly; but they were still there. Leaning against Benteley, her eyes closed, glass cupped in her red-tipped fingers, she said softly, “I want you to tell me. Are you going along with us?”

Benteley was silent a moment. “Yes,” he said finally.

Eleanor sighed. “Thank God. I’m so glad.”

Benteley leaned over and set down his glass on the low table. “I swore on; I took an oath to Verrick. I don’t have any choice, unless I want to break my oath and run out on him.”

“It’s been done.”

“I’ve never broken my oath. I got fed up with Oiseau-Lyre years ago but I never tried to get away. I could have; I’d take the risk of being caught and killed. I accept the law that gives a protector the power of life and death over escaped serfs. But I don’t think an oath should be broken, by either the serf or the protector.”

“I thought you said it was crumbling.”

“It is. But I don’t want to help it along.”

Eleanor set her glass down and reached up to put her smooth bare arms around his neck. “What kind of a life have you had? What have you done? Have you lived with very many women?”

“A few.”

“What were they like?”

Benteley shrugged. “Various kinds.”

“Were they nice?”

“I guess so.”

“Who was the last?”

Benteley thought back. “A few months ago. A class 7–9 girl named Julie.”

Eleanor’s green eyes were fixed on him intently. “Tell me what she was like.”

“Small. Pretty.”

“Very much like me?”

“Your hair is nicer.” He touched the girl’s soft, flame-red hair. “You have very nice hair. And eyes.” He took her tight against him and held her for a long time. “You’re very nice.”

The girl’s small fist was clutched around the charms that rested between her breasts. “It’s all coming out right. Luck, very good luck.” She stretched up to kiss him on the mouth; her warm, intense face vibrated against his for a moment and then she sank back down with a sigh. “It’s going to be good, all of us working here together, being together.”

Benteley said nothing.

After a time Eleanor detached herself from him and lit a cigarette. She sat gazing seriously at him, arms folded, chin up, eyes large and solemn. “You’re going a long way, Ted. Verrick thinks a lot of you. I was so afraid when you did that, last night. When you said those things. But he liked it. He respects you; he thinks you have something on the ball. And he’s right! There’s something unique and strong inside you.” She added pathetically, “Golly, I wish I could teep you. But it’s gone, it’s really gone.”

“I wonder if Verrick knows how much you gave up.”

“Verrick has more important things to think about.” Her voice caught with sudden excitement. “Tomorrow maybe we’ll be back in! Things will be the way they were before, the way you wanted them to be. Won’t that be wonderful?”

“I guess so.”

Eleanor put down her cigarette and leaned over quickly to kiss him. “And you really will be along with us? You’ll really help operate Pellig?”

Benteley nodded faintly. “Yes.”

“Then everything’s perfect.” She gazed up hungrily into his face, green eyes hot and excited in the semi-gloom. Her breath came quick and harsh, sweet-scented in his face. “Are these rooms all right? Are they large enough? Do you have many things to bring?”

“Not many,” Benteley said. A dull, heavy weight seemed to hang over him, a listless torpor. “This is fine.”

With a contented sigh, Eleanor slid away from him and with a single lithe motion swept up her glass. She snapped off the lamp and lay back happily against him. The only light was the glow of her cigarette resting in the little copper ashtray. The deep low color of burning flame radiated from the girl’s hair and lips. The nipples of her breasts seemed darkly luminous in the twilight. After a time Benteley turned to her, stirred by the steady lights of her body.

They lay satiated and languid, among their crumpled clothes, bodies steaming moistly with fulfilled love. Eleanor stretched her

bare arm to collect what remained of her cigarette. She brought it to her lips, close to Benteley's face, and breathed the oddly sweet scent of sexual satisfaction into his eyes, and nose, and mouth.

"Ted," she whispered presently, "I'm enough for you, aren't I?" She pulled herself up a trifle, a flow of muscles and flesh. "I know I'm sort of … small."

"You're fine," he said vaguely.

"There isn't anybody you remember you'd rather be with?" When there was no answer, she went on, "I mean, perhaps I'm not really much good at it, am I?"

"Sure. You're swell." His voice was empty, toneless. He lay against her inert and lifeless. "Just right."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Nothing," Benteley said. He struggled to his feet and moved dully away from her. "I'm just tired. I think I'll turn in." His voice gained sudden harshness. "As you said, tomorrow should be a big day."

NINE

Leon Cartwright was eating breakfast with Rita O'Neill and Peter Wakeman when the ipvic relay operator notified him that a closed-circuit transmission from the ship had been picked up.

"Sorry," Captain Groves said, as each faced the other across billions of miles of space. "I see it's morning there. You're still wearing your old blue dressing gown."

Cartwright's face was pale and haggard. And the image was bad; extreme distance made it waver and fade. "Where exactly are you?" he asked, in a slow, hesitant voice.

"Forty astronomical units out," Groves answered. Cartwright's appearance was a shock to him, but he was not certain how much was due to the distortions of long-distance relay transmission. "We'll start moving out into uncharted space soon. I've already switched over from the official navigation charts to Preston's material."

The ship had gone perhaps halfway. Flame Disc held an orbit of twice the radius vector of Pluto—assuming that it existed. The orbit of the ninth planet marked the limit of charted exploration; beyond it lay an infinite waste about which little was known and much had been conjectured. In a short while the ship would pass the final signal buoys and leave the finite, familiar universe behind.

"A number of the group want to go back," Groves said. "They realize they're leaving the known system. This is their last chance to jump ship; if they don't do it now, they're stuck to the end."

"How many would jump if they could?"

"Perhaps ten. Or more."

"Can you go on without them?"

“We’ll have more food-stuffs and supplies. Konklin and his girl Mary are staying. The old carpenter, Jereti. The Japanese optical workers, our jet stoker … I think we can make it.”

“Let them jump, then, if it won’t jeopardize the ship.”

“When you and I talked before,” Groves said, “I didn’t have a chance to congratulate you.”

Cartwright’s distorted image roused itself wearily. “Congratulate me? All right. Thanks.”

“I wish I could shake your hand, Leon,” Groves held his big dark hand up to the ipvic screen; Cartwright did the same, and their fingers appeared to touch. “Of course, you people there on Earth are used to it, by this time.”

A muscle in Cartwright’s cheek twitched spasmodically. “I have trouble believing it, myself. It seems like a kind of nightmare I can’t wake up from.”

“Nightmare! You mean the assassin?”

“That’s right.” Cartwright grimaced. “He’s supposed to be on his way. I’m sitting here waiting for him to show up.”

When he had concluded the transmission, Groves called Konklin and Mary into the control bubble and briefed them in a few unemotional words. “Cartwright agrees to let them jump ship. That takes care of them; at dinner I’ll make the announcement.”

He indicated a dial that had glowed into life. “See that rusty needle start moving? That’s the first time this indicator has reacted in the whole existence of the ship.”

“It means nothing to me,” Konklin said.

“That irregular pattern is a robot signal; I could slick it over to aud and you’d probably recognize it. That marks the final limit of charted space. No ships go beyond this distance except scientific expeditions making abstract tests.”

“When we claim the Disc,” Mary said, eyes wide, “that marker will be pulled down.”

“The expedition of ’89 found nothing,” Konklin pointed out easily. “And they had all Preston’s data, everything he did.”

“Maybe what Preston saw was an extra-large space serpent,” Mary suggested half-humorously, half-wanly. “Maybe it’ll devour us, like in the stories people tell.”

Groves eyed her stonily. “I’ll handle the navigation. You two go and supervise the loading of the lifeboat, so we can get the jumpers off. You’re sleeping down in the hold, aren’t you?”

“Down with everybody else,” Konklin said.

“When the lifeboat’s gone you can probably claim one of the cabins. Most of them will be empty—take any one you want.” Sourly, Groves added: “Most of the ship will be empty, I’m afraid.”

The hold had been the infirmary. The two of them carefully swept and cleaned every surface inch. Mary washed the walls and ceiling, mopped the floor and painstakingly dusted the vent grills. “There’s not so much metallic grit in here,” she said hopefully to Konklin, as she lugged waste debris to the disposal slot.

“This was for the crew.”

“If the ship lands all right, perhaps we could use this for our permanent living quarters. It’s better than I had back on Earth.” Throwing herself wearily down on the little iron cot, she slid off her sandals. “You have a cigarette? Mine are gone.”

Konklin moodily gave her his pack. “That’s the works.”

Lighting up gratefully, Mary leaned back and closed her eyes. “It’s peaceful, here. Nobody standing out in the corridors shouting.”

“Too quiet. I keep thinking of what’s outside. No-man’s-land. Between systems. God, the cold! It’s all around us, out there. Coldness, silence, death … if not worse.”

“Don’t think about it. We should keep busy.”

“When it comes down to it we’re not such fanatics after all. It seemed like a good idea, a tenth planet for everybody to migrate to. But now that we’re really out here—”

Troubled, Mary asked: “Are you mad at me?”

“I’m mad at all of us. Half the group has already jumped. I’m mad because Groves is sitting up there in the control bubble trying to plot a course on the basis of a madman’s mystic guess instead of accurate scientific data. I’m mad because this ship is a broken-down old ore-carrier, about to burst apart.” He finished, “I’m mad because we’ve passed the last marker and nobody comes this way but visionaries and crackpots.”

“Which are we?” Mary asked, in a small voice.

“We’ll find out, one of these days.”

Mary reached up shyly and took hold of his hand. “Even if we don’t get there, this will be awfully nice.”

“This? This little cell? Like a monk’s cell?”

“I think so.” She gazed up at him earnestly. “This is what I wanted, before. When I was moving around aimlessly, looking everywhere. Going from one person to the next. I didn’t want to be a bed girl … but I didn’t really know what I wanted. Now I think I’ve found it. Maybe I shouldn’t tell you—you’ll be mad again. I have a charm I made up to bring you to me. Janet Sibley helped me with it; she’s good at fixing them. I wanted you to love me very much.”

Konklin smiled and leaned down to kiss her.

Abruptly, soundlessly, the girl winked out of existence. A sheet of glaring white flame filled the room around him; there was nothing else, only the cold glittering fire that billowed everywhere, a universe of shimmering incandescence that ate away all shapes and being, that left nothing but its own self.

He pulled back, stumbled, and fell into the lapping sea of light. He wept, cried piteously, tried to creep away, scrabbled and clutched and moaned. He groped futilely for something, anything to

hang on to, but there was only the limitless expanse of dazzling phosphorescence.

And then the voice began.

It started deep inside him and bloomed to the surface in a vast rush. The sheer force of it stunned him. He sank down, babbled crazed nonsense, lay in a foetal heap, bewildered and helpless, blasted to limp, inert protoplasm. The voice thundered in him and around him, a world of sound and fire that consumed him completely. He seemed a wad of shriveled-up debris, a seared ruin, cast out by the raging inferno of living energy.

"Earth ship," the voice said. *"Where are you going? Why are you here?"*

The sound thrilled through Konklin, as he lay helpless, sprawled in the lake of foaming light. The voice ebbed and flowed like the fire itself, a pulsing mass of raw energy that lashed at him relentlessly, within and without.

"This is beyond your system," the voice echoed through his crushed brain. *"You have gone outside. Do you understand that? This is the middle space, the emptiness between your system and mine. Why have you come so far? What is it you are after?"*

In the control bubble, Groves struggled desperately against the current of fury that washed over his body and mind. He crashed blindly against the navigation table; instruments and charts rained down and danced around him like hot sparks. The voice continued harshly, without pause, a burning arrogance roaring in it, a vast contempt for the beings it spoke to.

"Fragile Earthmen, venturing out here, go back to your own system! Go back to your little orderly universe, your strict civilization. Stay away from the regions you do not know! Stay away from darkness and monsters!"

Groves stumbled against the hatch. Groping feebly, he managed to creep from the bubble into the corridor. The voice came again, a staggering crash of pure force that impaled him against the battered hull of the ship.

“I see you seek the tenth planet of your system, the legendary Flame Disc. Why do you seek it? What do you want with it?”

Groves shrieked in terror. He knew, now, what this was, *The Voices*—prophesied in Preston’s book. Desperate hope plucked at Groves. *The Voices that led …* He opened his mouth to speak, but the booming roar cut him savagely off.

“Flame Disc is our world. Carried by us across space to this system. Set in motion here, to circle your sun for eternity. You have no right to it. What is your purpose? We are curious.”

Groves tried to direct his thoughts outward. In a brief wheeling instant of time he tried to project all his hopes, plans, all the needs of the race, mankind’s vast yearnings …

“Perhaps,” the voice answered. *“We will consider and analyze your verbalized thoughts … and your submarginal impulses. We must be careful. We could incinerate your ship, if we cared to.”* There was a momentary pause, and then the voice continued reflectively. *“Not for the present, at least. We must take time.”*

Groves found the ipvic transmission room. He stumbled to the transmitter; it was a vague shape dancing beyond the rim of white fire. His fingers flung on the power: closed circuits locked automatically in place.

“Cartwright,” he gasped. Across the void the beamed signal speared its way to the Directorate monitor at Pluto and from there to Uranus. From planet to planet the thin signal cut, relayed directly to the office at Batavia.

“Flame Disc was placed within your system for a reason,” the great voice continued. It paused, as if consulting with invisible companions. *“Contact between our races might bring us to a new level of cultural integration,”* it went on presently. *“But we must—”*

Groves huddled over the transmitter. The image was too remote; his blinded eyes failed to catch it. He prayed feverishly that the signal was getting across, that back at Batavia Cartwright was seeing what he saw, hearing the vast booming voice he heard, understanding the terrifying, yet incredibly hopeful words.

"We must study you," the voice continued. *"We must know more about you. We do not decide quickly. As your ship is guided toward Flame Disc we will reach a decision. We will decide whether to destroy you—or to lead you to safety on Flame Disc, to a successful conclusion of your expedition."*

Reese Verrick accepted the ipvic technician's hurried call. "Come along," he snapped to Herb Moore. "The bug on Cartwright's ship. A transmission's coming across to Batavia, something important."

Seated before the vid-tap the ipvic technicians had set up for Farben, Verrick and Moore gazed with incredulous amazement at the scene. Groves, a miniature figure, lost in rolling flame, was dwarfed to the size of a helpless insect by the surge of pure energy that played around him. From the aud speaker above the screen the booming voice, distorted and dimmed by millions of miles of space, thundered out.

"*… our warning. If you attempt to ignore our friendly efforts to guide your ship, if you try to navigate on your own, then we cannot promise* …"

"What is it?" Verrick croaked, blank-faced and dazed. "Is this rigged? Are they glimmed on the bug, trying to dazzle us with this set-up?" He began to tremble. "Or is this really—"

"Shut up," Moore grated. He peered hastily around. "You have a tape running on this?"

Verrick nodded, slack-jawed. "What have we got in on, in God's name? There's those legends and rumors of fabulous beings out there, but I never believed them. I never thought it could really be true!"

Moore examined the vid and aud tape recorders and then turned briskly to Verrick. "You think this is a supernatural manifestation, do you?"

"It's from another civilization." Verrick quavered with awe and terror. "This is incredible. We've made contact with another race."

“Incredible is right,” Moore said tartly. As soon as the transmission ceased, and the screen had faded into black silence, he snatched up the tapes and hurried them out of the Farben buildings to the Public Information Library.

Within an hour the analysis was in, from the main Quiz research organs in Geneva. Moore grabbed the report up and carried it to Reese Verrick.

“Look at this.” He slammed the report down in the middle of Verrick’s desk. “Somebody’s being taken, but I’m not sure who.”

Verrick blinked in confusion. “What is it? What’s it say? Is that voice—”

“That was John Preston.” There was a peculiar expression on Moore’s face. “He once recorded part of his *Unicorn*; the Information Library has it all down on aud, along with vid shots for us to compare. There is absolutely no doubt of it.”

Verrick gaped foolishly. “I don’t understand. Explain it to me.”

“John Preston is out there. He’s been waiting for that ship and now he’s made contact with it. He’ll lead it to the Disc.”

“But Preston died a hundred and fifty years ago!”

Moore laughed sharply. “Don’t kid yourself. Get that crypt open as soon as possible and you’ll understand. *John Preston is still alive.”*

TEN

The MacMillan robot moved languidly up and down the aisle collecting tickets. Overhead, the midsummer sun beat down and was reflected from the gleaming silver hull of the sleek intercon rocket liner. Below, the vast blue of the Pacific Ocean lay sprawled out, an eternal surface of color and light.

"It really looks nice," the straw-haired young man said to the pretty girl in the seat next to him. "The ocean, I mean. The way it mixes with the sky. Earth is about the most beautiful planet in the system."

The girl lowered her portable tv-lenses, blinked in the sudden glare of natural sunlight, and glanced in confusion out the window. "Yes, it's nice," she admitted shyly.

She was a very young girl, not over eighteen at the most. Her breasts were small and up-tilted; her hair was curly and short, a halo of dark orange—the latest color style—around her slim neck and finely-cut features. She blushed and returned hastily to her tv-lenses.

Beside her, the harmless, pale-eyed young man got out his package of cigarettes, took one, and then politely offered her the gold-encased pack.

"Thanks," she said nervously, in a throaty quaver, as her long crimson-tipped fingernails grappled with the cigarette. "Thanks," she said again, as he applied his gold cigarette lighter in her behalf.

"How far are you going?" the young man inquired presently.

"To Peking. I have a job at the Soong Hill—I think. I mean, I got a notice for an interview." She fluttered with her miniature purse. "I

have it somewhere. Maybe you can look at it and tell me what it means; I don't understand all those legal phrases they use." She added quickly, "Of course, when I get to Batavia, then Walter can …"

"You're classified?"

The girl's blush deepened. "Yes, class 11–76. It isn't much, but it helps." Hurriedly, she brushed ashes from her silk embroidered neck scarf and right breast. "I just got my classification last month." After a hesitation, she asked: "Are you classified? I know some people are touchy, especially those who aren't …"

The young man indicated his sleeve. "Class 56–3."

"You sound so … cynical."

The young man laughed his thin colorless laugh. "Maybe I am." He eyed the girl benignly. "What's your name?"

"Margaret Lloyd." She lowered her eyes shyly.

"My name's Keith Pellig," the young man said, and his voice was even thinner and drier than before.

The girl thought about it a moment. "Keith Pellig?" For an instant her smooth forehead wrinkled unnaturally. "I think I've heard that name, haven't I?"

"You may have." There was ironic amusement in the toneless voice. "It isn't important, though. Don't worry about it."

"It always bothers me when I don't remember things." Now that she knew the young man's name, it was permissible to speak openly. "I wouldn't have got my classification except that I'm living with a very important person. He's meeting me at Batavia." Pride mixed with modesty showed on her guileless face. "Walter fixed things up for me. Otherwise I never would have made it."

"Good for him," Keith Pellig said.

The MacMillan robot slid up beside them and extended its grapple. Margaret Lloyd quickly passed over her ticket and Keith Pellig did the same.

“Greetings, brother,” Pellig said cryptically to the robot, as his ticket stub was punched and returned.

After the robot was gone Margaret Lloyd said to him, “Where are you going?”

“Batavia.”

“On business?”

“I’d call it business.” Pellig smiled humorlessly. “When I’ve been there awhile, I may start calling it pleasure. My attitude varies.”

“You talk so strangely,” the girl said, puzzled and more than somewhat awed by the complexities of an older man.

“I’m a strange person. Sometimes I hardly know what I’m going to do or say next. Sometimes I seem a stranger to myself. Sometimes what I do surprises me and I can’t understand why I do it.” Pellig stubbed out his cigarette and lit another; the ironic smile had left his face and he scowled dark and troubled. His words slowed down until they came out painfully, intensely. “It’s a great life, if you don’t weaken.”

“What does that mean? I never heard that before.”

“A phrase from an old manuscript.” Pellig peered past her, out the wide window at the ocean below. “We’ll be there soon. Come upstairs to the bar and I’ll buy you a drink.”

Margaret Lloyd fluttered with fear and excitement. “Is it all right?” She was terribly flattered. “I mean, since I’m living with Walter and—”

“It’s all right,” Pellig said, getting to his feet and moving moodily down the aisle, his hands deep in his pockets. “I’ll even buy you two drinks. Assuming I still know who you are, after we get up there.”

Peter Wakeman gulped down a glass of tomato juice, shuddered, and pushed the analysis across the breakfast table to Cartwright. “It really is Preston. It’s no supernatural being from another system.”

Cartwright's numb fingers played aimlessly with his coffee cup. "I can't believe it."

Rita O'Neill touched his arm. "That's what he meant in the book. He planned to be there to guide us. The Voices."

Wakeman was deep in thought. "What interests me is something else. A few minutes before our call reached the Information Library, another call was received for an identical analysis."

Cartwright sat up with a jerk. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know. They claim aud and vid tapes were shot to them for analysis, substantially the same material we sent over. But they don't know who it was from."

"Can't you tell anything?" Rita O'Neill asked uneasily.

"First of all, they actually know who sent in the prior informational request. But they're not telling. That gives me plenty to think about right there. I'm toying with the idea of sending a few Corpsmen over to scan the officials who had access to the face-to-face request."

Cartwright waved his hand impatiently. "Forget that. We have more important things to worry about. Any news on Pellig?"

Wakeman looked surprised. "Only that he's supposed to have left the Farben Hill."

Cartwright's face twitched. "You haven't been able to make contact?"

Rita's hand gripped soothingly around his. "They'll make contact when he enters the protected zone. He's still outside."

"For God's sake, can't you go out and get him? Are you just going to sit there and wait for him?" Cartwright shook his head wearily. "Sorry, Wakeman. I know we've gone over this a thousand times."

Wakeman was embarrassed, but not for himself so much. He was embarrassed for Leon Cartwright. In the few days since Cartwright had become Quizmaster there had been a corrosive change in him. Cartwright sat twitching and fumbling at his coffee cup, a hunched, aged, and very frightened man. His face was dark and lined with

fatigue. His pale blue eyes glinted with apprehension. Again and again he started to speak, then changed his mind and descended into a cloud of silence.

"Cartwright," Wakeman said softly, "you're in bad shape."

Cartwright glared at him. "A man's coming here to kill me, publicly and in broad daylight, with the whole-hearted approval of the system. Everybody in the world's sitting and cheering him, propped up in front of their tv sets, watching and waiting for the results. The winner of this … national sport. How the hell am I supposed to feel?"

"It's only one man," Wakeman said quietly. "He has no more power than you. In fact, you've got the whole Corps behind you, and all the resources of the Directorate."

"If we get him, there'll be another. An endless stream of them."

"Each Quizmaster has had to face this." Wakeman raised an eyebrow. "I thought all you wanted was to stay alive until your ship was safe."

Cartwright's gray, exhausted face was answer enough. "I want to stay alive. Is there anything wrong with that?" Cartwright pulled himself up and forced his hands to stay quiet. "But you're right, of course." He smiled shakily, half-apologetically. "Try to see my side of it. You've been dealing with these assassins all your life. To me it's a new thing; I've been a trivial, anonymous entity, completely out of the public eye. Now I'm chained here under a ten billion watt searchlight. A perfect target—" His voice rose. "And they're trying to kill me! What in the name of God is this strategy of yours? What are you going to do?"

He's pitifully scared, Wakeman thought to himself. He's falling apart. He doesn't care a damn about his ship. Yet that's why he's here in the first place.

In Wakeman's mind, Shaeffer's answering thoughts came. Shaeffer was at his desk on the other side of the Directorate building, acting as the nexus between Wakeman and the Corps. "This is the time to get him over there. Although I don't really think Pellig is very close.

But in view of Verrick's sponsorship we should leave a wide margin for error."

"True," Wakeman thought back. "Interesting: at any other time Cartwright would be overwhelmed to learn that John Preston is alive. Now he pays only passing attention. And he can assume his ship has reached its destination."

"You assume there is a Flame Disc?"

"Evidently. But that's no concern of ours." Dryly, Wakeman thought, "And apparently no concern of Cartwright's. He managed to get himself in as Quizmaster—as a function of slamming the ship all the way out to Flame Disc. But now that he's actually face to face with the situation he sees it as a death trap."

Wakeman turned to Cartwright and spoke to him aloud.

"All right, Leon. Get ready: we're taking you out of here. We have plenty of time. No report on Pellig yet."

Cartwright blinked and then eyed him suspiciously. "Out where? I thought the protective chamber Verrick fixed up—"

"Verrick assumes you'll use that; he'll try there first. We're taking you off Earth entirely. The Corps has arranged a retreat on Luna. It's registered as a conventional psycho-health resort. Actually, it's somewhat more elaborate than Verrick's installations here at Batavia. While the Corps battles it out with Pellig, you'll be 239,000 miles away."

Cartwright gazed helplessly at Rita O'Neill. "What should I do? Should I go?"

"Here at Batavia," Wakeman said, "a hundred ships land every hour. Thousands of people pour in and out of the Islands; this is the most populated spot in the universe. Christ, this is the functional center of the nine-planet system. But on Luna, a human being literally stands out. Our resort is set apart from the others; our front-organization bought land in an undesirable section. You'll be surrounded by thousands of miles of bleak, airless space. If Keith Pellig should manage to trace you to Luna and comes walking along

in his bulky Farley suit, geiger counter, radar cone and popper and helmet, I think we'll spot him."

Wakeman was trying to joke, but Cartwright didn't smile. "In other words you can't defend me here."

Wakeman sighed. "We can defend you better if you're on Luna. It's nice there. We have it fixed up attractively. You can swim, play games, bask in the sun, relax, even sleep. We can put you in suspended animation until this blows over."

"I might never wake up again," Cartwright said cunningly.

It was like talking to a child. Frightened, helpless, the old man had ceased to reason. He had plunged all the way down to stubborn, archaic, infantile thalamic processes. Wakeman wished like hell it was late enough in the day for a drink. He got to his feet and examined his watch. "Miss O'Neill will be coming along with you." He made his voice patient but firm. "So will I. Any time you want to come back to Earth, you can. But I suggest you see our lay-out there; make up your own mind after you've seen it."

Cartwright hesitated in an agony of doubt. "You say Verrick doesn't know about it? You're positive?"

"Better tell him we're sure," Shaeffer's thoughts came to Wakeman. "He needs certitude. No use handing him a bunch of statistics at a time like this."

"We're positive," Wakeman said aloud, and it was a cold-blooded lie. To Shaeffer he silently thought, "I hope we're doing the right thing. Verrick probably knows. But it doesn't matter; if everything goes right Pellig will never get out of Batavia."

"And if he does?" the thought came back wryly.

"He can't. It's your job to stop him. I'm not really worried, but I'd feel better if Verrick's Hills didn't hold the land on three sides of our resort."

The lounge of the intercon liner was swank and glittering with chrome. Keith Pellig stood by Miss Lloyd as she seated herself

awkwardly in one of the deep thick-plush chairs and folded her nervous hands together on the surface of the null-legged plastic table. Pellig then sat down opposite her.

“What’s the matter?” the girl asked. “Is anything wrong?”

“No.” Pellig moodily examined the menu. “What do you want to drink? Make it snappy; we’re almost there.”

Miss Lloyd recoiled and her cheeks burned. The nice-looking man was grim-faced and sullen; she repressed a sudden desire to leap up and hurry downstairs to her seat. He was acting badly, insulting and nasty … but the needling fear that it was something she had done dissolved her resentment and made her fearful instead. “What Hill are you under fief to?” she asked timidly.

There was no answer.

The MacMillan waiter glided up. “What do you wish, sir or madam?”

Within the Pellig body, Ted Benteley was deep in stormy thought. He ordered bourbon and water for himself and a Tom Collins for Margaret Lloyd. He scarcely noticed the two glasses the MacMillan slid before them; he paid the chit automatically and began to sip.

Miss Lloyd was babbling youthful nonsense; she was excited with anticipation, her eyes shone, white teeth sparkled, orange hair glowed like a candle flame. It was wasted on the man opposite her. Benteley allowed the Pellig fingers to take the bourbon and water back to the table; he fooled with the glass and continued reflecting.

While he was reflecting, the mechanism switched. Silently, instantly, he was back at the Farben labs.

It was a shock. He closed his eyes and hung on tight to the circular metal band that enclosed his body, a combination support and focus. On his ipvic-engineered vidscreen the scene he had just left glimmered brightly. The body cast a microwave sheet that bounced at close range and was relayed by ipvic along the control channel to Farben in the form of a visual image. A miniature Margaret Lloyd was seated across from a miniature Keith Pellig, in a

microscopic lounge. Tiny sounds filtered from the aud end of the system, as Miss Lloyd bubbled away.

“Who’s in it?” Benteley demanded shakily.

Herb Moore shoved him back down as he started to climb from the protective ring of metal. “Don’t move! Unless you want half your psyche slammed over there and half left here.”

“I was just in it. It won’t hit me again for a while.”

“You might be next. Sit still until your focus-system is disconnected and you’re out of the circuit.”

At this moment a red button three rows down and four to the right was illuminated. On the screen the operator had already taken over; there was no time lag. He had, Benteley noted, in his first moment of shock spilled his glass of bourbon.

Miss Lloyd’s chatter paused momentarily. “Are you all right?” she asked the Pellig body. “You look so sort of—pale.”

“I’m okay,” the Pellig body murmured.

“He’s doing fine,” Moore said to Benteley. “That’s your friend Al Davis.”

Benteley allowed the position of the luminous button to impress itself on his mind. “Which one represents you?”

Moore ignored the question. “The switch will ignite your indicator a split-second before you’re actually arced across. If you keep your eyes open you’ll have warning. If you turn away you may find yourself standing under a palm tree facing fully armed teeps.”

“Or dead,” Benteley said. “In this game of musical chairs who gets left standing up?”

“The body’s not going to be blasted. It’s going to reach Cartwright and destroy him.”

“Your lab is already constructing a second android,” Benteley contradicted. “When this one is demolished, you’ll have it ready to be named by the Challenge Convention.”

“Assuming something goes wrong, the operator will be jerked back here before the body perishes. You can calculate the odds against your being in the body at that particular moment. One out of twenty-four, times the forty percent chance of losing the body at all.”

“Will you really be hooked into this rig?”

“I’ll be hooked in exactly like you.”

As Moore moved restlessly toward the exit lock of the cube, Benteley demanded, “What happens to my real body while I’m over?”

“As soon as you’re arced out this stuff goes into action.” Moore indicated the machinery that filled the metal chamber. “All this keeps the body functioning: supplies air, tests blood pressure, heart rate, carries off wastes, feeds, supplies water—whatever is needed.”

The exit lock slammed. Benteley was alone in the machinery-crammed cubicle.

On the screen Al Davis was buying this girl a second drink. Neither he nor Miss Lloyd had much to say: the sound coming over the aud was a blur of crowd noise and clink of glasses. Benteley caught a glimpse through the microscopic window of the liner and his heart constricted. The ship was getting near the sprawling Indonesian Empire, the largest functioning aggregate of human beings in the nine-planet system.

It wasn’t hard to picture the teeps checking the mechanics of their interception network. A vision of the first contact: a teep lounging at the transport field, or pounding a typer as some minor official in the ticket office. Or a female teep hanging around with the usual squad of bed girls that met the incoming ships. Or a teep child being tugged along by its parents. Or a terribly old man, a veteran of some roger-war, sitting feebly in the shade with a blanket over his knees.

Anybody. Anywhere. What looked like a lipstick, a fluff of candy, a mirror, a newspaper, a coin, a handkerchief. The variety of modern high-quality weapons was infinite.

On the screen the passengers of the transport were getting fussily to their feet and preparing to land. There was always this moment of suspense and tension as the sleek liner set itself down; then the sigh of relief as the reactors clicked off and the landing locks rumbled open.

Keith Pellig got clumsily to his feet and made vague motions toward Margaret Lloyd. The two of them joined the slowly-moving crowd that pushed down the ramp to the passenger level. Davis was doing fairly well; once he stumbled, but that was all. Benteley glanced up tautly at the detailed schematic of the Directorate's Batavia buildings. The landing field was linked directly to the main building grounds; the position of Pellig was already indicated on the schematics by a moving pin of color.

There it was—but no pin showed the position of the teep network. Without effort Benteley could calculate how soon the first contact between Pellig, the artificial android, and the teep network, would occur. In minutes, it could be figured on one hand.

* * *

Wakeman arranged for the C-plus rocket to be brought up to the surface from its storage locker. He poured himself a drink of Scotch, gulped it hastily, and then conferred with Shaeffer. "In half an hour Batavia will be a *cul-de-sac* for Pellig. Bait but no quarry."

Shaeffer's hurried response came back to him. "We now have an inferential report on Pellig. He boarded a regular non-stop intercon liner at Bremen. Passage to Java. He's on his way someplace between here and Europe."

"You don't know which ship?"

"He has a non-specific commute ticket. But we can assume he's already taken off."

Wakeman hurried upstairs to Cartwright's private quarters. Cartwright was listlessly packing his things with the aid of two MacMillan robots and Rita O'Neill. Rita was pale and tense, but

composed. She was going through aud reference tapes with a high-speed scanner, sorting those worth keeping. Wakeman found himself smiling at the slim, efficient figure with a lucky cat's foot dangling between her breasts as she worked.

"Keep hold of that," Wakeman said to Rita, indicating the cat's foot.

She glanced quickly up. "Any news?"

"Pellig will be showing up any minute. Transports land all the time; we have somebody there to check them in. Our own ship is almost ready." He indicated Cartwright's unpacked things. "Do you want me to help you pack?"

Cartwright roused himself. "Look, I don't want to get caught out in space. I—don't want to."

Wakeman was astonished at the words, and at the thoughts he caught behind them. A naked fear trickled piteously through the old man's mind, up from the deepest levels. "We won't get caught in space," Wakeman said rapidly; there wasn't much time for any more shilly-shallying. "The ship is the new experimental C-plus, the first off the assembly-line. We'll be there almost instantly. Nobody can stop a C-plus once it's in motion."

Cartwright's gray lips twitched. "Is it a good thing to break up the Corps? You said some will be here and some will go with us. And I know you can't scan over that great a distance. Wouldn't it be—"

"Goddamn it," Rita O'Neill said explosively. She threw down her armload of tapes. "Stop doing what you're doing! It's not like you!"

Cartwright grunted miserably and began pawing at his heap of shirts. "I'll do what you say, Wakeman, I trust you." He went on clumsily packing, but from his terrified and bewildered mind leaked the growing tendrils of his primitive, atavistic longing-fear. It swelled and became stronger each moment: the overpowering urge to hurry into the reinforced inner office Verrick had constructed, and to lock himself in. Wakeman flinched as the raw primal panic hit him, the frantic desire to claw a way back into the womb. He deliberately turned his mind from Cartwright's to Rita O'Neill's.

As he did so, Wakeman got a further shock. A thin icy column of hate radiated from the girl's mind directly at him. He quickly began untangling it, surprised and taken aback by its suddenness: it hadn't been there before.

Rita saw the expression on his face, and her thoughts changed. Quick, canny, she had sensed his awareness; she was thinking now of the aud tape humming through her ears as she operated the scanner. She passed it on to him; he was deafened by a furious roar of voices, speeches, lectures, parts of Preston's books, arguments, comments …

"What is it?" he said to her. "What's wrong?"

Rita said nothing, but her lips pressed together until they were white. Abruptly she turned and hurried out of the room.

"I can tell you what it is," Cartwright said hoarsely. He slammed his battered suitcases and locked them. "She blames you for this."

"For what?"

Cartwright caught up his two eroded suitcases and moved slowly toward the hall door. "You know, I'm her uncle. She's always seen me at the head of things, in authority, giving orders and making plans. Now I'm mixed up in something I don't understand." His voice died into a troubled murmur. "Situations I can't control. I have to rely on you." He moved wanly aside to let Wakeman open the door. "I suppose I've changed, since I came here. She's disappointed … and she blames you for it."

"Oh," Wakeman said. He moved after Cartwright, aware of two things: that he didn't understand people as well as he thought; and that finally Cartwright had made up his mind to do as the Corps suggested.

The C-plus ship was up-ended on the emergency platform in the center of the main building. As soon as Cartwright and his niece and the group of Corpsmen had entered, the hull locks slid smoothly into place and sealed themselves tight. The roof of the building rolled back and the bright noon-day sky blazed down.

“This is a small ship,” Cartwright observed. He had turned pale and sickly; his hands shook as he strapped himself to his seat. “Interesting design.”

Wakeman quickly fastened Rita’s belt for her and then his own. She said nothing to him; the pencil of hostility had melted a little. “We may black-out during the flight. The ship is robot-operated.” Wakeman settled down in his seat and thought the go-ahead signal to the intricate mechanism beneath them. The sensitive relays responded, the machinery shifted, and, someplace close by, high-powered reactors screamed shrilly into life.

With the ship responsive to his thoughts, Wakeman enjoyed the luxury of imagining a vast steel and plastic extension of his own small body. He relaxed and drank in the clean, sleek purr of the drive as it warmed. It was a beautiful ship: the first actually made from the original model and designs.

“You know how I feel,” Rita O’Neill said to him abruptly, shattering his temporary pleasure. “You were scanning me.”

“I know how you felt. I don’t think you still feel that way.”

“Perhaps not; I don’t know. It’s irrational to blame you. You’re doing your job the best you can.”

“I think,” Wakeman said, “I’m doing the right thing. I think I’ve got this under control.” He waited a moment. “Well? The ship’s ready to take off.”

Cartwright managed to nod. “I’m ready.”

Wakeman considered briefly. “Any sign?” he thought to Shaeffer.

“Another passenger transport coming in,” the rapid thought came back. “Entering scanning range any moment.”

Pellig would arrive at Batavia; that was certain. He would search for Cartwright; that was also certain. The unknown was Pellig’s detection and death. It could be assumed that if he escaped the teep net, he would locate the Lunar resort. And if he located the resort …

“There’s no protection on Luna,” Wakeman thought to Shaeffer. “We’re giving up all positive defense once we take him there.”

“That’s right,” Shaeffer agreed. “But I think we’ll get Pellig here at Batavia. Once we make contact, that’s it.”

Wakeman decided. “All right. We’ll take the chance; the odds are good enough.” He gave the mental signal and the ship moved into position for the take-off. Automatic grapples lined it up with its destination, the pale dead eye hanging dully in the noon-day sky. Wakeman closed his eyes and forced relaxation on his body-muscles.

The ship moved. First, there was the regular turbine thrust, then the furious lash of energy as the C-plus drive swung into life, sparked by the routine release of power.

For a moment the ship hovered over the Directorate buildings, glowing and shimmering. Then the C-plus drive caught, and in an instant the ship hurtled from the surface in a flash of blinding speed that rolled back waves of unconsciousness over the people within.

As the darkness relentlessly collected Peter Wakeman, a vague blur of satisfaction drifted through his dwindling mind. Keith Pellig would find nothing at Batavia, nothing but his own death. The Corps’ strategy was working out.

In the moment Wakeman’s signal sent the glowing C-plus ship away from Batavia, the regular intercon liner rumbled to a slow halt at the space field and slid back its locks.

With a group of businessmen and commuters, Keith Pellig stepped eagerly down the metal ramp and emerged in the sunlight, blinking and peering excitedly around him, at his first view of the Directorate buildings, the endless hurrying people and traffic—and the waiting network of teeps.

ELEVEN

At five-thirty a.m. the heavy construction rocket settled down in the center of what had once been London. In front of it and behind it thin razor-sharp transports hissed to smooth landings and disgorged parties of armed guards. They quickly fanned out and took up positions to intercept stray Directorate police patrols.

Within a few moments the dilapidated old building that was the offices of the Preston Society had been surrounded.

Reese Verrick, in a heavy wool greatcoat and boots, stepped out and followed his construction workers down the sidewalk and around the side of the building. The air was chill and thin; buildings and streets were moist with night dampness, gray silent structures with no sign of life.

"This is the place," the foreman said to Verrick. "They own this old barn." He indicated the courtyard, strewn with rubble and waste. "The monument is there."

Verrick paced ahead of the foreman, up the debris-littered path to the courtyard. The workmen were already tearing down the steel and plastic monument. The yellowed plastic cube which was John Preston's crypt had been yanked down and was resting on the frozen concrete among bits of trash and paper that had accumulated through the months. Within the translucent crypt the dried-up shape had shifted slightly to one side; the face was obscured by one pipe-stem arm flung across the glasses and nose.

"So that's John Preston," Verrick said thoughtfully.

The foreman squatted down and began examining the seams of the crypt. "It's a vacuum-seal, of course. If we open it here it'll pulverize to dust particles."

Verrick hesitated. “All right,” he agreed reluctantly. “Take the whole works to the labs. We’ll open it there.”

The work crews who had entered the building appeared with armloads of pamphlets, tapes, records, furniture, light fixtures, clothing, endless boxes of raw paper and printing supplies. “The whole place is a storeroom,” one of them said to the foreman. “They have junk heaped to the ceiling. There seems to be a false wall and some kind of sub-surface meeting chamber. We’re prying the wall out and getting in there.”

This was the slatternly run-down headquarters from which the Society had operated. Verrick wandered into the building and found himself in the front office. The work crews were collecting everything in sight; only the bare water-stained walls, peeling and dirty, remained. The front office led onto a yellow hall. Verrick headed down it, past a dusty fly-specked photograph of John Preston still hanging among some rusty scarf hooks. “Don’t forget this,” he said to his foreman. “This picture here.”

Beyond the picture a section of wall had been torn away. A crude false passage ran parallel to the hall; workmen were swarming around, hunting within the passage for additional concealed entrances.

“We suppose there’s some kind of emergency exit,” the foreman explained. “We’re looking for it, now.”

Verrick folded his arms and studied the photograph of John Preston. Preston had been a small man, like most cranks. He was a tiny withered leaf of a creature with prominent wrinkled ears pulled forward by his heavy horn-rimmed glasses. There was a wild tangle of dark gray hair, rough and uncut and uncombed, and small, almost feminine lips. His stubbled chin was not prominent, but hard with determination. He had a crooked, lumpish nose, a jutting Adam’s apple and unsightly neck protruded from his food-stained shirt.

It was Preston’s eyes that attracted Verrick: harsh, blazing, two uncompromising steel-sharp orbs that smoldered behind his thick

lenses. Preston glared out, furious with wrath, like an ancient prophet. One crabbed hand was up, fingers twisted with arthritis. It was almost a gesture of defiance, but more of *pointing.* The eyes glowered fiercely at Verrick; their aliveness startled him. Even behind the dust-thick glass of the photograph, the eyes were hot with fire and life and feverish excitement. Preston had been a birdlike cripple, a bent-over half-blind scholar, astronomer and linguist … *And what eke?*

"We located the escape passage," Verrick's foreman said to him. "It leads to a cheap public sub-surface garage. They probably came and went in ordinary cars. This building seems to have been their only headquarters. They had some kind of clubs spread around Earth, but those met in private apartments and didn't number over two or three members apiece."

"Is everything loaded?" Verrick demanded.

"All ready to go: the crypt, the stuff we found in the building, and snap-models of the layout here, for future reference."

Verrick followed his foreman back to the construction ship. A few moments later they were on their way back to Farben.

Herb Moore appeared immediately, as the yellowed cube was being lowered to a lab worktable. "This is his crypt?" he demanded.

"I thought you were hooked into that Pellig machinery," Verrick said, taking off his greatcoat.

Moore ignored him and began rubbing dirt from the translucent shield that covered John Preston's withered body. "Get this stuff off," he ordered his technicians.

"It's old," one of them protested. "We have to work carefully or it'll turn to powder."

Moore grabbed a cutting tool and began severing the shield from its base. "Powder, hell. He probably built this thing to last a million years."

The shield split, brittle and dry with age. Moore clawed it away and dropped it to splinter against the floor. From the opened cube a

cloud of stale musty air billowed out; swirls of dust danced in the faces of Moore and his assistants and made them cough and pull back. Around the worktable vidcameras ground away, taking a permanent record of the procedure and materials examined.

Moore impatiently signalled. Two MacMillans lifted the wizened body from the hollow cube and held it suspended at eye-level on their surface of magnetic force. Moore poked at the face of the body with a pointed probe; suddenly he grabbed the right arm and yanked. The arm came off without resistance and Moore stood holding it foolishly.

The body was a plastic dummy.

"See?" he shouted. "Imitation!" He threw the arm down violently; one of the MacMillans caught it before it reached the floor. Where the arm had been attached a hollow tear gaped. The body itself was hollow. Metal ribs supported it, careful struts placed by a master builder.

Moore walked all around it, face dark and brooding, saying nothing to Verrick until he had examined it from all sides. Finally he took hold of the hair and tugged. The skull-covering came off, leaving a dull-gleaming metal hemisphere. Moore tossed the wig to one of the robots and then turned his back on the exhibit.

"It looks exactly like the photograph," Verrick said admiringly.

Moore laughed. "Naturally! The dummy was made first and then photographed. But it's probably about the way Preston looked." His eyes flickered. "Looks, I mean."

Eleanor Stevens detached herself from the watching group and approached the dummy cautiously. "But is this anything new? Your work goes much farther than this. Presumably Preston adapted the MacMillan papers the way you did. He built a synthetic of himself the way you built Pellig."

"What we heard," Moore said, "was Preston's actual voice. It was not a vocal medium artificially constructed. No two voices have the same tape-pattern. Even if he's modeled a synthetic after his own body—"

“You think he’s still alive in his own body?” Eleanor demanded. “That isn’t possible!”

Moore didn’t answer. He was staring moodily at the dummy of John Preston; he had picked up the arm again and was mechanically pulling loose the artificial fingers one by one. The look on his face was nothing Eleanor had ever seen before.

“My synthetic,” Moore said very faintly, “will live a year. Then it deteriorates. That’s as long as it’s good for.”

“Hell!” Verrick grunted, “if we haven’t destroyed Cart-wright in a year it won’t make any difference!”

“Are you sure a synthetic couldn’t be built so accurately that the aud and vidtapes would—” Eleanor began, but Moore cut her off.

“I can’t do it,” he stated flatly. There was a strange note in his voice. “If it can be done, I sure as hell don’t understand how.” Abruptly he shook himself and hurried to the door of the lab. “Pellig should be entering the teep defense network. I want to be integrated in the apparatus when that happens.”

Verrick and Eleanor Stevens followed quickly after him, the dummy of John Preston forgotten.

“This should be interesting,” Verrick said briefly, as he hurried toward his office. Anticipation gleamed from his heavy face as he rapidly snapped on the screen the ipvic technicians had set up for him. With Eleanor standing nervously behind him, Verrick prepared himself for the sight of Keith Pellig as he stepped from the intercon transport, onto the field at Batavia.

Keith Pellig took a deep breath of warm fresh air and then glanced around him.

Fluttering excitedly, Margaret Lloyd rushed down the ramp after him. “I want you to meet Walter, Mr. Pellig. He’s around somewhere. Oh, dear! All these people …”

The field was crowded. Commuters were getting off transports, hordes of Directorate bureaucrats were lined up for transportation

home. Milling groups of passengers waiting fussily for interplan ships. There were stacks of luggage and hard-working MacMillans everywhere, and a constant din of noise and furious activity, the voices and the roar of ships, public loudspeakers, the rumble of surface cars and buses.

Al Davis noted all this, as he halted the Pellig body and waited warily for Miss Lloyd to catch up with him. The more people the better: the ocean of sound obscured his own mental personality.

"There he is," Margaret Lloyd gasped, breasts quivering, bright-eyed and entranced by the sights. She began waving frantically. "Look, he sees us! He's coming this way!"

A thin-faced man in his middle forties was solemnly edging through the throngs of talking, laughing, perspiring people. He looked patient and bored, a typical classified official of the Directorate, part of its vast army of desk men.

He waved to Miss Lloyd and called something, but his words were lost in the general uproar.

"We can have dinner someplace," Miss Lloyd said to Pellig. "Do you know a place? Walter will know a place; he knows just about everything. He's been here a long time and he's really got to where he—" Her voice momentarily faded, as a giant truck rumbled by.

Davis wasn't listening. He had to keep moving; he had to get rid of the chattering girl and her middle-aged companion and start toward the Directorate buildings. Down his sleeve and into his right hand poured the slender wire that fed his thumb-gun. The first sight of Cartwright, the first moment the Quizmaster appeared in front of him—a quick movement of his hand, thumb raised, the tide of pure energy released …

At that moment he caught sight of the expression on Walter's face.

Al Davis blindly moved the Pellig body through the milling people, toward the street and the lines of surface cars. Walter was a teep, of course. The moment of recognition was evident as he caught Davis' thoughts and his brief run-through of his program of

assassination. A group of people separated and the Pellig body sprawled clumsily against a railing. With one bound Davis carried it over the railing and onto the sidewalk.

He glanced around … and felt panic. Behind him, Walter had kept on coming.

Davis started down the sidewalk. *He had to keep moving.* He came to an intersection and hurried to the other side. Surface cars honked and roared around him; he ignored them and raced on.

The full impact was just beginning to hit him. Any of them might be teeps. The word passed on, scanned from one mind to the next. The teep network was a connected ring; he had run up against the first station and that was the trigger. There was no use trying to outrun Walter; the next teep would rise up ahead of him and intercept him.

He halted, then ducked into a store. He was surrounded by fabrics and materials, a dazzling display of colors and textures on all sides of him. A few well-dressed women were examining and languidly buying. He sped past a counter toward a rear door.

At the door a clerk cut him off, a fat man in a blue suit, pudding face flushed with indignation. “Say, you can’t come back here! Who the hell are you?” His fat body wedged itself in the way.

Davis’ mind raced frantically. He dimly sensed rather than saw the group of figures quietly entering the swank entrance behind him. He ducked down and then hurled himself past the astonished clerk, down an aisle between counters. He bowled over a terrified old woman and emerged beside a vast display rack that majestically revolved to reveal its anatomy. What next? They were at both doors; he had trapped himself. He thought frantically, desperately. What next?

While he was trying to decide, a silent *whoosh* picked him up and slammed him violently against the protective ring that circled his body. He was back at Farben.

Before his eyes a miniature Pellig raced and darted on the microscopic screen. The next operator was already working to solve

the problem of escape, but Davis wasn't interested. He sagged limply in his chair and allowed the complex wiring attached to his body—his *real* body—to drain off the bursts of adrenaline that choked his chest and heart.

Another red button, not his own, was illuminated. He could ignore the shrill sounds scratching at his ears; somebody else had to work out the answer, for a while. Davis tried to reach his hand up to the good-luck charm inside his shirt, but the protective ring stopped him. It didn't matter: he was already safe.

On the screen Keith Pellig burned through the plate-plastic window of the luxurious clothing store and floundered out onto the street. People screamed in horror; there was pandemonium and confusion.

The fat red-faced clerk stood as if turned to stone. While everyone else raced around frantically, he stood motionless, his lips twitching, his body jerking in convulsive spasms. Saliva dribbled from his thick mouth. His eyes rolled inward. Suddenly he collapsed in a blubbery heap.

The scene shifted, as Pellig escaped from the pack of people clustered around the front of the store. The clerk was lost from sight. Al Davis was puzzled. Had Pellig destroyed the clerk? Pellig was speeding lithely down the sidewalk; his body was built for rapid motion. He turned a corner, hesitated, and then disappeared into a public theater.

The theater was dark. Pellig blundered in confusion: a bad strategy, Davis realized The darkness wouldn't affect the teeps, who depended not on sight but on telepathic contact. The operator's mind was as obvious in darkness as in broad daylight; and the movements of the body were impeded.

The operator now realized his mistake and sought an exit. But already vague shapes were moving in on him. The questioning figures were only partly visible. Pellig hesitated, then dashed into a lavatory. A woman followed him to the door and halted briefly. In

that interval Pellig burned his way through the wall of the lavatory with his thumb-gun and emerged in the alley behind the theater.

The body stood considering, trying to make up its mind. The vast shape of the Directorate building loomed ahead, a golden tower that caught the mid-day sunlight and sparkled it back. Pellig took a deep shuddering breath and started toward it at a relaxed trot …

And the red button twitched.

The body stumbled. The new operator, dazed with surprise, fought for control. The body smashed into a heap of garbage, struggled up, and then loped on. Nobody followed. There were no visible pursuers. The body reached a busy street, glanced around, and then hailed a robot-operated public taxi.

A moment later the cab roared off, in the direction of the Directorate tower. Other cars and people flitted past, as it gained speed. In the back, Pellig relaxed against the soft seat cushions, face placid. This operator was learning confidence fast. He nonchalantly lit a cigarette and examined the passing streets. He cleaned his nails, reached down to touch a burned spot on his trouser leg, tried to interest the robot driver in conversation, then settled comfortably back.

Something strange was happening. Davis turned his eyes to the location schematics, which showed the space-relationship of the body to the Directorate offices. *The body had gone too far.* Incredibly, the teep network had failed to stop it.

Why?

Sweat stood out on Davis' palms and armpits. A dazzling nausea licked through him. Maybe it was going to work. Maybe the body would actually get through.

Calmly, confidently, lounging in the back seat of the public taxi, Keith Pellig sped toward the Directorate offices, his thumb-gun resting loosely in his lap.

Major Shaeffer stood in front of his desk and bellowed with fright.

"It's not possible," drummed the disorganized thoughts of the Corpsman nearest him. "It *isn't, isn't, isn't possible.*"

"There must be a reason," Shaeffer managed to think back.

"We lost him." Incredulous, fearful, the thoughts dinned back and forth through the web-strands of the network.

"Shaeffer, *we lost him*! Walter Remington picked him up as he stepped off the ship. He had him. He caught the whole syndrome. The assassin's thumb-gun, his fear, his strategy, his personality-characteristics. And then—"

"You let him get away."

"Shaeffer, *he disappeared.*" A running stream of disbelief. "Suddenly he was gone. He vanished in thin air. I tell you, we *did not lose him.* At the second station he ceased to exist."

"How?"

"I don't know." There was numb misery in the man. "Remington passed him to Allison at the clothing store. The impressions came clear as glass; no doubt of it. The assassin began to run through the store. Allison kept lock easily; his thoughts stood out the way an assassin's thoughts do, that highly-colored etched intentness."

"He must have raised a shield."

"There was no diminution. The entire personality was cut off instantly—not merely the thoughts."

Shaeffer's mind dived crazily. "It's never happened to us before." He cursed in a loud, wild voice that shook the objects on his desk. "And Wakeman's on Luna. We can't teep him; I'll have to use the regular ipvic."

"Tell him something's terribly wrong. Tell him the assassin disappeared into thin air."

Shaeffer hurried to the transmission room. As he was jerking the closed-circuit to the Lunar resort into life, a new flurry of excited

thoughts chilled him.

“I’ve picked him up!” An eager Corpswoman, relayed by the network from one to another. “I’ve got him!”

“Where are you?” A variety of insistent demands came from up and down the network. There were quick, urgent calls as the frantic teeps collected for action. “Where is he?”

“Theater. Near the clothing store.” Rapid, disjointed instructions. “He’s heading into the men’s room. Only a few feet from me; shall I go in? I can easily—”

The thought broke off.

Shaeffer squalled a shattering blast of despair and rage down the network. “Go on!”

Silence, And then … the mind screamed.

Shaeffer clapped his hands futilely to his head and closed his eyes. Gradually the storm died down. All up and down the network the violence rolled and lapped. Mind after mind was smashed, short-circuited, blacked-out by the overload. Shattering pain lashed through the entire web of telepaths, back to the original mind.

Three in a row.

“Where is he?” Shaeffer shouted. “What happened?”

The next station responded faintly. “She lost him. She’s dropped from the network. Dead, I think. Burned-out.” Bewilderment. “I’m in the area but I can’t catch the mind she was scanning. The mind she was scanning is gone!”

Shaeffer managed to raise Peter Wakeman on the ipvic vidscreen. “Peter,” he croaked aloud, “we’re beaten.”

“What do you mean? Cartwright isn’t even there!”

“We picked up the assassin and then lost him. We picked him up again later on, a few minutes later—in another location. Peter, *he got past three stations.* And he’s still moving. How he—”

“Listen to me,” Wakeman interrupted. “Once you get hold of his mind, stay with him. Close ranks; follow him until the next station

takes over. Maybe you're too far apart. Maybe—"

"I've got him," a thought came to Shaeffer. "He's near me. I'll find him: he's close by."

The network yammered excitement and suspense.

"I'm getting something strange." Doubt mixed with curiosity, and was followed by startled disbelief. "There must be more than one assassin. But that's not possible." Growing excitement. "I can actually see him. Pellig just got out of a cab—he's walking along the street ahead of me. He's going to enter the Directorate building by the main entrance; it's all there in his mind. I'll kill him. He's stopping for a streetlight. Now he's thinking of crossing the street and going—"

Nothing.

Shaeffer waited. And still nothing came. "Did you kill him?" he demanded. "Is he dead?"

"He's gone!" The thought came, hysterical and giggling. "He's standing in front of me and at the same time he's gone. He's here and he isn't here. Who are you? Who do you want to see? Mr. Cartwright isn't here just now. What's your name? Are you the same man I … or is there … that we haven't out this is going out is *out* …"

The damaged teep dribbled off into infantile mutterings, and Shaeffer dropped him from the network. It didn't make sense. It wasn't possible. Keith Pellig was still there, standing face to face with a Corpsman, in easy killing-distance—yet Keith Pellig had vanished from the face of the Earth!

At the viewing screen rigged up for monitoring the progress of the assassin, Verrick turned to Eleanor Stevens. "We were wrong. It's working better than we had calculated. Why?"

"Suppose you were talking to me," Eleanor said tightly. "Carrying on a conversation. And I vanished completely. Instead of me a totally different person appeared."

“A different person physically,” Verrick agreed. “Yes.”

“Not even a woman. A young man or an old man. Some utterly different *body* who continued the conversation as if nothing had happened.”

“I see,” Verrick said avidly.

“Teeps depend on telepathic rapport,” Eleanor explained. “Not visual image. Each person’s mind has a unique taste. The teep hands on by mental contact, and if that’s broken—” The girl’s face was stricken. “Reese, I think you’re driving them insane.”

Verrick got up and moved away from the screen. “You watch for a while.”

“No.” Eleanor shuddered. “I don’t want to see it.”

A buzzer sounded on Verrick’s desk. “List of flights out of Batavia,” a monitor told him. “Total count of time and destination for the last hour. Special emphasis on unique flights.”

“All right.” Verrick nodded vaguely, accepting the metal-foil sheet and dropping it with the litter heaped on his desk. “God,” he said hoarsely to Eleanor. “It won’t be long.”

Calmly, his hands in his pockets, Keith Pellig was striding up the wide marble stairs, into the main entrance of the central Directorate building at Batavia, directly toward Leon Cartwright’s suite of inner offices.

TWELVE

Peter Wakeman had made a mistake.

He sat for a long time letting the realization of his mistake seep over him. With shaking fingers he got a fifth of Scotch from his luggage and poured himself a drink. There was a scum of dead dried-up protine in the glass. He threw the whole thing in a disposal slot and sat sipping from the awkward bottle. Then he got to his feet and entered the lift to the top floor of the resort.

Corpsmen, dressed in bright vacation colors, were relaxing and enjoying themselves around and in a vast tank of sparkling blue water. Above them a dome of transparent plastic kept the fresh spring-scented air in, and the bleak void of the Lunar landscape out. Laughter, the splash of lithe bodies, the flutter of color and texture and bare flesh, blurred past him as he crossed the deck.

Rita O'Neill had climbed from the water and was sunbathing drowsily a little way beyond the main group of people. Her sleek naked body gleamed moistly in the hot light that filtered down through the lens of the protective balloon. When she saw Wakeman she sat up quickly, black hair cascading in a glittering tide of motion down her tanned shoulders and back.

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

Wakeman threw himself down in a deck chair. A MacMillan approached him and he automatically took an old-fashioned from its tray. "I was talking with Shaeffer," he said, "back at Batavia."

Rita took a brush and began stroking out her heavy cloud of hair. A shower of sparkling drops steamed from the sun-baked deck around her. "What did he have to say?" she asked, as casually as she could. Her eyes were large and dark and serious.

Wakeman sipped his drink aimlessly and allowed the bright warmth of the overhead sun to lull him to half-slumber. Not far off, the crowd of frolicking bathers splashed and laughed and played games in the chlorine-impregnated water. A huge shimmering water-ball lifted itself up and hung like a living sphere before it plunged down in the grip of a flashing white-toothed Corpsman. Against her towel Rita's body was a dazzling shape of brown and black, supple lines of flesh moulded firm and ripe in the vigor of youth.

"They can't stop him," Wakeman said. In his stomach the whiskey had formed a congealed lump that settled cold and hard into his loins. "He'll be here, not long from now. I had it calculated wrong."

Rita's black eyes widened. She momentarily stopped brushing, then started again, slowly and methodically. She shook her hair back and climbed to her feet. "Does he know Leon is here?"

"Not yet. But it's only a question of time."

"And we can't defend him here?"

"We can try. Maybe I can find out what went wrong. Maybe I can get more information on Keith Pellig."

"Will you take Leon someplace else?"

"It's not worth it. This is as good a place as any. At least there aren't many minds to blur scanning here." Wakeman got stiffly to his feet and pushed away his half-finished drink. He felt old; and his bones ached. "I'm going downstairs to go over the tapes we scanned on Herb Moore, particularly the ones we got the day he came to talk to Cartwright. Maybe I can put something together."

Rita slipped on a robe and tied the sash around her slim waist. She dug her feet into ankle-length boots and fished together her brush and sun-glasses and lotion. "How much time do we have before he gets here?"

"We should start getting ready. Things are moving fast. Too fast for anyone's good. It all seems to be … falling apart."

“I hope you can do something.” Rita’s voice was calm, emotionless. “Leon’s resting. I made him lie down; the doctor gave him a shot of something to make him sleep.”

Wakeman lingered. “I did what I thought was right. I must have left something out. It’s clear we’re fighting something much more complex and cunning than we realized.”

“You should have let him run it,” Rita said. “You took the initiative out of his hands. You’re like Verrick and the rest of them. You never believed he could manage. You treated him like a child until he gave up and believed it himself.”

“I’ll stop Pellig,” Wakeman said quietly. “I’ll correct things. I’ll find out what it is and stop him someplace, before he gets to your uncle. It’s not Verrick who’s running things. Verrick could never work anything out this clever. It must be Moore.”

“It’s too bad,” Rita said, “that Moore isn’t on our side.”

“I’ll stop him,” Wakeman repeated. “Some way, somehow.”

“Between drinks, maybe.” Rita halted for a moment to tie the laces on her boots, and then she disappeared down a descent ramp toward Cartwright’s private quarters. She didn’t look back.

Keith Pellig climbed the wide marble stairs of the Directorate building with confidence. He walked swiftly, keeping up with the fast-moving crowd of classified bureaucrats pushing good-naturedly into the elevators and passages and offices. In the main lobby Pellig halted a moment to get his bearings.

With a thunderous din, alarm bells went off throughout the building.

The good-natured milling of officials and visitors abruptly ceased. Faces lost their friendly monotony; in an instant the easy-going crowd was transformed into a suspicious, fearful mass. From concealed speakers harsh mechanical voices dinned:

“Clear the building! Everyone must leave the building!” The voices shrilled in a deafening cacophony. “The assassin is in the

building! Everyone must leave!”

Pellig lost himself in the swirling waves of men and women pouring around with ominous grimness. He edged, darted, pushed his way into the interior of the mass, toward the labyrinth of passages that led from the central lobby.

There was a scream. Someone had recognized him. There was rapid firing, a blackened, burned-out patch of charred bodies, as guns were fired in crazed panic. Pellig escaped and continued circling warily, keeping in constant motion.

“The assassin is in the main lobby!” the mechanical voices blared. “Concentrate on the main lobby!”

“There he is!” a man shouted. Others took up the roar. “That’s him, there!”

On the roof of the building the first wing of military transports was settling down. Green-clad soldiers poured out and began descending in lifts. Heavy weapons and equipment appeared, dragged to lifts or grappled over the side to the ground level.

At his screen, Reese Verrick pulled away briefly and said to Eleanor Stevens, “They’re moving in non-teeps. Does that mean—”

“It means the Corps has been knocked out,” Eleanor answered. “They’re through. Finished.”

“Then they’ll track Pellig visually. That’ll cut down the value of our machinery.”

“The assassin is in the lobby!” the mechanical voices roared above the din. Down corridors MacMillan heavy-duty weapons rolled, guns bristling like quills. Soldiers threw plastic cable spun from hand-projectors in an intricate web across the mouths of corridors. The milling, excited officials were herded toward the main entrance of the building. Outside, soldiers were setting up a ring of steel, a circle of men and guns. As the officials poured from the building they were examined visually one by one and then passed on.

But Pellig wasn’t coming out. He started back once—and at that moment the red button jumped, and Pellig changed his mind.

The next operator was eager and ready. He had everything worked out the moment he entered the synthetic body. Down a side corridor he sprinted, directly at a clumsy MacMillan gun trying to wedge itself in the passage. As the locks of the gun slid down, Pellig squeezed through. The locks slammed viciously after him and the passage was sealed off.

"The assassin has left the lobby!" the mechanical voices squalled. "Remove that MacMillan weapon!"

The gun was hastily collected and propelled protesting and whirring to a storage locker. Troops poured after Pellig as he raced down deserted office corridors, cleared of officials and workers, yellow-lit passages that echoed with distant clangs.

Pellig thumb-burned his way through a wall and into the main reception lounge. The lounge was empty and silent. It was filled with chairs, vid and aud tapes, lush carpets and walls—but no people.

At his screen, Benteley started with recognition. This was the lounge where he had waited to see Reese Verrick …

The synthetic body skimmed from office to office, a weaving, darting thing that burned a path ahead of it without visible emotion or expression. Once it raced through a room of still-working officials. Screaming men and women scrambled wildly for escape. Desks were hastily abandoned in the frantic rush to exits. Pellig ignored the terrified workers and skimmed on, his feet barely touched the floor. At a checkpoint he seemed almost to rise and hurtle through the air, a blank-faced moist-haired Mercury.

The last commercial office fell behind. Pellig emerged before the vast sealed tank that was the Quizmaster's inner fortress. He recoiled as his thumb-gun showered harmlessly against the thick rexeroid surface. Pellig stumbled away, momentarily bewildered.

"The assassin is at the inner office!" mechanical voices dinned above and around him, up and down corridors, in rooms throughout the elaborate building. "Surround and destroy him!"

Pellig raced in an uncertain circle—and again the red button twitched.

The new operator staggered, crashed against a desk, pulled the synthetic body quickly to its feet, and then proceeded to systematically burn his way around the side of the rexeroid tank.

In his office, Verrick rubbed his hands with satisfaction. “Now it won’t be long. Is that Moore operating it?”

“No,” Eleanor said, examining the break-down of the indicator board. “It’s one of his staff.”

The synthetic body emitted a supersonic blast. A section of the rexeroid tank slid away, and the concealed passage lay open. The body hurried up the passage without hesitation.

Under its feet gas capsules popped and burst uselessly. The body did not breathe.

Verrick laughed like an excited child. “See? They can’t stop him. He’s *in.*” He leaped up and down and pounded his fists against his knees. “Now he’ll kill him. Now!”

But the rexeroid tank, the massive inner fortress with its armory of guns and ipvic equipment, was empty.

Verrick squealed a high-pitched frenzied curse. “He’s not there! He’s gone!” His massive face melted with disappointment. “They got the son of a bitch out!”

At his own screen, Herb Moore jerked controls with convulsive dismay. Lights, indicators, meters and dials, flowed wildly. Meanwhile, the Pellig body stood rooted to the spot, one foot into the deserted chamber. There was the heavy desk Cartwright should have been sitting at. All that was left were files, warning apparatus, equipment and machinery. But Cartwright wasn’t there.

“Keep him looking!” Verrick shouted. “Cartwright must be around someplace!”

The sound of Verrick’s voice grated in Moore’s aud phones. His mind worked rapidly. On the screen, his technician had started the body into uncertain activity. The schematic showed Pellig’s pin at

the very core of the Directorate: the assassin had arrived but there was no quarry.

“It was a trap!” Verrick shouted in Moore’s ear. “A decoy! Now they’re going to destroy him!”

On all sides of the demolished fortress-cube, troops and weapons were in motion. Vast Directorate resources responding to Shaeffer’s hurried instructions.

“The assassin is at the inner cube!” mechanical speakers shrieked triumphantly. “Close in and kill him!”

“Get the assassin!”

“Shoot him down and grind him underfoot!”

Eleanor leaned close to Verrick’s hunched, massive shoulder. “They deliberately let him get in. Look—they’re coming for him.”

“Keep him moving!” Verrick shouted. “For God’s sake they’ll burn him to particles if he simply stands there!”

Down the wrecked corridor Pellig had cut, the snouts of guns poked inquisitively. Slow-rumbling equipment was solemnly organizing in a pattern of death, taking their time: there was no hurry.

Pellig floundered in confusion. He raced back down the passage and out of the cube, then sped from door to door like a trapped animal. Once he halted to burn down a MacMillan gun that had ventured too close and was clumsily taking aim. The gun dissolved and Pellig sprinted past its smoking ruin. But behind it the corridor was jammed with troops and weapons. He gave up and scurried back.

Herb Moore snapped an angry sentence to Verrick. “They took Cartwright out of Batavia.”

“Look for him.”

“He’s not there. It’s a waste of time.” Moore thought quickly. “Transfer me your analysis of ship-movements from Batavia. Especially in the last hour.”

“But—”

“We know he was there up to an hour ago. Hurry!”

The metalfoil rolled from its slot by Moore’s hand. He snatched it up and scanned the entries and analytical data. “He’s on Luna,” Moore said. “They took him off in their C-plus ship.”

“You don’t know,” Verrick retorted angrily. “He may be in a sub-surface shelter of some kind.”

Moore ignored him and slammed home a switch. Buttons leaped with excitement; Moore’s body sagged limply against its protective ring.

At his own screen Ted Benteley saw the Pellig body jump and stiffen. A tremor crossed its features, a subtle alteration of the vapid face. A new operator had entered it; above Benteley the red button had moved on.

The new operator wasted no time. He burned down a handful of troops and then a section of wall. The steel and plastic fused together and bubbled away in molten fumes. Through the rent the synthetic body skimmed, a blank-faced projectile plunging in an arcing trajectory. A moment later it emerged from the building and, still gaining velocity, hurtled straight upward at the dull disc of the moon as it hung in the early-afternoon sky.

Below Pellig the Earth fell away. He was moving out into free space.

Benteley sat paralyzed at his screen. Suddenly everything made sense. As he watched the body race through darkening skies that lost their blue color and gained pinpoints of unwinking stars, he understood what had happened to him. It had been no dream. The body was a miniature ship, equipped in Moore’s reactor labs. And—he realized with a rush of admiration—the body needed no air. And it didn’t respond to extreme temperature. The body was capable of interplanetary flight.

Peter Wakeman received the ipvic call from Shaeffer within a few seconds of the time Pellig left Earth. “He’s gone,” Shaeffer muttered. “He took off like a meteor out into space.”

“Heading where?” Wakeman demanded.

“Toward Luna.” Shaeffer’s face suddenly collapsed. “We gave up. We called in regular troops. The Corps couldn’t do a thing.”

“Then I can expect him any time?”

“Any time,” Shaeffer said wearily. “He’s on his way.”

Wakeman broke the connection and returned to his tapes and reports. His desk was a littered chaos of cigarette butts, coffee cups, and a still unfinished fifth of Scotch. Now there was no doubt: Keith Pellig was not a human being. He was clearly a robot combined with high-velocity reactor equipment, designed in Moore’s experimental labs. But that didn’t explain the shifting personality that had demoralized the Corpsmen. Unless …

Some kind of multiple mind came and went. Pellig was a fractured personality artificially segmented into unattached complexes, each with its own drives, characteristics and strategy. Shaeffer had been right to call in regular nontelepathic troops.

Wakeman lit a cigarette and aimlessly spun his good luck charm until it tugged loose from his hand and banged into the tapes stacked on his work-desk. *He almost had it* If he had more time, a few days to work the thing out … He got up suddenly and headed for a supply locker. “Here’s the situation,” he thought to the Corpsmen scattered around the levels of the resort. “The assassin has survived our Batavia network. He’s on his way to Luna.”

His announcement provoked horror and dismay. There was a quick scramble from sun decks and bathing pools, bedrooms and lounges and cocktail bars.

“I want every Corpsman in a Farley suit,” Wakeman continued. “This didn’t work at Batavia, but I want you to set up a make-shift network. The assassin has to be intercepted outside the balloon.” He

radiated what he had learned about Pellig and what he believed. The answering thoughts came back instantly.

“A robot?”

“A multiple-personality synthetic?”

“Then we can’t go by mind-touch. We’ll have to lock on physical-visual appearance.”

“You can catch murder-thoughts,” Wakeman disagreed, as he buckled on his Farley suit. “But don’t expect continuity. The thought-processes will cut off without warning. Be prepared for the impact; that’s what destroyed the Corps at Batavia.”

“Does each separate complex bring a new strategy?”

“Apparently.”

This brought amazement and admiration. “Fantastic! A brilliant contribution!”

“Find him,” Wakeman thought grimly, “and kill him on the spot. As soon as you catch the murder-thought, burn him to ash. Don’t wait for anything.”

Wakeman grabbed up the fifth of Scotch and poured himself one last good drink from what had been Reese Verrick’s private stock. He locked his Farley helmet in place and snapped on the air-temp feed lines. He collected a hand popper and hurried to one of the exit sphincters of the resort balloon.

The arid, barren expanse of waste was a shock. He stood fumbling with his humidity and gravity control, adjusting to the sight of an infinity of dead matter.

The moon was a ravaged, blasted plain. There were gaping craters where the original meteors had smashed away the life of the satellite. Nothing stirred, no wind or dust tremor or flutter of life. Wherever Wakeman looked there was only the pocked expanse of rubble, heaped debris littered across the bone-harsh cliffs and cracks. The face of the moon had dried up and split. The skin, the flesh, had been eroded away by millenniums of ruthless abrasion. Only the skull was left, vacant eye sockets and gaping mouth. As

Wakeman stepped gingerly forward, he was tramping over the features of a death's-head.

Behind him the resort glowed and twinkled, a luminous balloon of warmth and comfort and relaxation.

While Wakeman was hurrying across the deserted landscape, a rattled thought hammered jubilantly in his brain. "Peter, I've spotted him! He landed just now a quarter mile from me!"

Wakeman began to run awkwardly over the rubbled stone, one hand on his popper. "Keep close to him," he thought back. "And keep him away from the balloon."

The Corpsman was excited and incredulous. "He landed like a meteor. I was already a mile outside the balloon when your orders came. I saw a flash; I went to investigate."

"How far from the balloon are you?"

"About three miles."

Three miles. Keith Pellig was that close to his prey. Wakeman cut his gravity-pressure to minimum and rushed forward wildly. With great leaps and bounds he covered the distance toward his fellow Corpsman; behind him the glowing balloon of light dwindled and fell away. Panting, gasping for breath, he fled toward the assassin.

He stumbled over a crack and pitched head-first on his face. As he struggled up the shrill hiss of escaping air whined in his ears. With one hand he dragged out the emergency repair pack; and with the other he fumbled for his popper. It was gone. He had lost it, dropped it somewhere among the ancient heaps of debris around him.

The air was going fast. He forgot the gun and concentrated on patching his Farley suit. The plastic goo hardened instantly, and the terrifying hiss cut off. As he began searching frantically among the boulders and dust, a new string of thoughts struck excitedly at him.

"He's moving! He's heading toward the balloon. He's located the resort."

Wakeman cursed, and gave up looking for the popper. He set off at a bounding trot toward the Corpsman. A high ridge rose ahead of him; he sprinted up it and half-slid, half-rolled down the far side. A vast bowl stretched out ahead of him. Craters and ugly gaping wounds leered in the skull-face. The Corpsman's thoughts came to him strongly now. He was close by.

And for the first time, he caught the thoughts of the assassin.

Wakeman stopped rigid. "That's not Pellig!" he radiated back wildly. "That's Herb Moore!"

Moore's mind pulsed with frenzied activity. Unaware that he was being teeped, he had let down all barriers. His eager, high-powered thoughts and drives poured out in a ceaseless flood-tide that mounted to fever pitch as he spotted the glowing balloon that encased the Directorate's vacation resort.

Wakeman stood frozen, concentrating on the stream of mental energy lapping at him. It was all there, the whole story. Moore's super-charged mind contained every fragment of it, all the missing pieces he had held back before.

Pellig consisted of a variety of human minds, altering personalities hooked to an intricate switch-mechanism, coming and going at random, in chance formation, without pattern, Minimax, randomness, a deep blur of M-game theory …

It was a lie.

Wakeman recoiled. Under the thick layer of game-theory was another level, a submarginal syndrome of hate and desire and terrible fear: jealousy of Benteley, a ceaseless terror of death, involved schemes and plans, a complicated gestalt of *need* and goal-oriented drive actualized in an overpowering sledge-hammer of ambition. Moore was a driven man, dominated by the torment of dissatisfaction. And his dissatisfaction culminated in ruthless webs of strategy.

The twitch of the Pellig machinery wasn't random. Moore had complete control. He could switch operators into the body at any time; and pull them out at any time. He could set up any

combination he pleased. He was free to hook and unhook himself at will. And …

Moore's thoughts suddenly focused. He had spotted the Corpsman trailing him. The Pellig body shot quickly upward, poised, and then rained a thin stream of lethal death down on the scurrying telepath.

The man's mind shrieked once, and then his physical being dissolved in a heap of incinerated ash. The sickening moment of a teep's death rolled over Wakeman. Peter felt the lingering, tenacious and completely futile struggle of the mind to keep itself collected, to retain personality and awareness after the body was gone.

"Peter …" Like a cloud of volatile gas the Corpsman's mind hung together, then slowly, inexorably, began to scatter. Its weak thoughts faded. "Oh, God …" The man's consciousness, his *bang* dissolved into random particles of free energy. The mind ceased to be a unit. The gestalt that had been the man relaxed—and the man was dead.

Wakeman cursed his lost gun. He cursed himself and Cart-wright and everybody in the system. He threw himself behind a bleak boulder and lay crouched, as Pellig drifted slowly down and landed lightly on the dead surface of the moon. Pellig glanced around, seemed satisfied, and began his cautious prowl toward the luminous balloon three miles distant.

"Get him!" Wakeman radiated desperately. "He's almost at the resort!"

There was no response. No other Corpsmen were close enough to pick up and relay his thoughts. With the death of the closest Corpsman, the jury-rigged network had shattered. Pellig was walking calmly through an undefended gash.

Wakeman leaped to his feet. He lugged an immense boulder waist-high and staggered to the top of the inclined rise. Below him Keith Pellig walked bland-faced, almost smiling. He appeared to be a gentle straw-haired youth, without guile or cunning. Wakeman managed to raise the rock above his head; the weak Lunar gravity

was on his side. He swayed, lifted it high—and hurled it bouncing and crashing onto the swift-walking synthetic.

There was one startled glance as Pellig saw the rock coming. He scrambled easily away, a vast spring that carried him yards from the path of the lumbering boulder. From his mind came a blast of fear and surprise, a frantic panic. He stumbled, raised his thumb-gun toward Wakeman …

And then Herb Moore was gone.

The Pellig body altered subtly. Wakeman's blood froze at the uncanny sight. Here, on the desolate surface of the moon, a man was changing before his eyes. The features shifted, melted momentarily, then reformed. It wasn't the same. It wasn't the same face … because it wasn't the same man. Moore was gone and a new operator had taken over. Behind the pale blue eyes a different personality peered out.

The new operator wavered. He fought briefly for control, then managed to right the body as the rock bounced harmlessly away. Surprise, momentary confusion, radiated to Wakeman as he struggled for another boulder.

"*Wakeman*!" the thoughts came. "Peter Wakeman!"

Wakeman dropped his boulder and straightened up. The new operator had recognized him. It was a familiar thought-pattern; Wakeman probed quickly and deeply. For a moment he couldn't place the personality; it was familiar but obscured by the immediacy of the situation. It was larded over with wary fear and antagonism. But he knew it, all right. There was no doubt.

It was Ted Benteley.

THIRTEEN

Out in dead space, beyond the known system, the creaking GM ore-carrier lumbered hesitantly along. In the control bubble Groves sat listening intently, his dark face rapt.

"The Flame Disc is still far away," the vast presence murmured in his mind. "Don't lose contact with my own ship."

"You're John Preston," Groves said softly.

"I am very old," the voice replied. "I have been here a long time."

"A century and a half," Groves said. "It's hard to believe."

"I have waited here. I knew you would be coming. My ship will hover nearby; you will probably pick up its mass from time to time. If everything goes correctly I'll be able to guide you to the actual landing on the Disc."

"Will you be there?" Groves asked. "Will you meet us?"

There was no answer. The voice had faded; he was alone.

Groves got unsteadily to his feet and called Konklin. A moment later both Konklin and Mary Uzich hurried into the control bubble. Jereti loped a few paces behind. "You heard him," Groves said thickly.

"It was Preston," Mary whispered.

"He must be old as hell," Konklin said. "A little old man, waiting out here in space for us to come, waiting for all these years …"

"I think we'll get there," Groves said. "Even if they managed to kill Cartwright, we'll still reach the Disc."

"What did Cartwright say?" Jereti asked Groves. "Did it perk him up to hear about Preston?"

Groves hesitated. “Cartwright was preoccupied.”

“But surely he—”

“He’s about to be murdered!” Groves savagely flicked on the manual controls. “He hasn’t got time to think about anything else.”

Nobody said anything for a while. Finally Konklin asked, “Has there been any late news?”

“I can’t raise Batavia. Military black-out has completely screened out the ipvic lines. I picked up emergency troop movements from the inner planets toward Earth. Directorate wings heading home.”

“What’s that mean?” Jereti asked.

“Pellig has reached Batavia. And something has gone wrong. Cartwright must have his back to the wall. Somehow, the teep Corps must have failed.”

Wakeman shouted frantically. “Benteley! Listen to me! Moore has it rigged; you’re being tricked. *It’s not random.*”

It was hopeless. No sound carried. Without atmosphere his voice died in his helmet. Benteley’s thoughts radiated to him clear and distinct; but there was no way Wakeman could communicate back. He was boxed-in, baffled. The figure of Keith Pellig and the mind of Ted Benteley were only a few yards from him—and there was no way he could make contact.

Benteley’s thoughts were mixed. It’s Peter Wakeman, he was thinking. The teep I met in the lounge. He realized that he was in danger; he was aware of the nearby luminous resort balloon. Wakeman caught an image of Cartwright: the job of killing. And beneath that, Benteley’s deep aversion and doubt, his distrust of Verrick and his dislike of Herb Moore. Benteley was undecided. For an instant the thumb-gun wavered.

Wakeman scrambled down the ridge onto the level plain. With frantic haste he sketched vast crude letters in the ancient dust: “MOORE TRICKED YOU. NOT RANDOM.”

Benteley saw the words, and the vapid face of Keith Pellig hardened. Benteley's thoughts congealed. *What the hell?* He was thinking. Then he realized that Wakeman was teeping him, that a one-sided conversation was going on with himself as transmitter and the telepath as receiver. "Go on, Wakeman," Benteley radiated harshly. "What do you mean, tricked?"

In Benteley's mind, there was ironic amusement. He was seeing a telepath, an advanced mutant human, sketching clumsy figures in the dust like some primitive reduced to the most primal means of communication. Wakeman wrote desperately: "MOORE WILL KILL YOU AND CARTWRIGHT TOGETHER."

Benteley's mind radiated amazement. "What do you mean?" Then suspicion. "This is some kind of strategy. There must be other teeps coming." His thumb-gun came quickly up …

"BOMB." Wakeman, panting for breath, sought a new surface on which to write. But he had written enough. Benteley was filling in the details himself. A phantasmagoria of comprehension: vivid glimpses of his fight with Moore, his sexual relations with Moore's mistress, Eleanor Stevens, Moore's jealousy of him. It flashed through Benteley's mind in bewildering procession, and he lowered the thumb-gun.

"They're seeing this," Benteley thought. "All the operators at their screens. And Moore; he's seeing it, too."

Sensing instant danger, Wakeman leaped up and ran clumsily at the Pellig figure. Gesturing excitedly, trying to shout across the airless void, he got within two feet before Benteley halted him with an ominous wave of his thumb-gun.

"Stay away from me," Benteley thought grimly. "I'm still not sure of you. You're working for Cartwright."

Wakeman scratched frantically: "PELLIG SET TO DETONATE WHEN CLOSE TO CARTWRIGHT. MOORE WILL SWITCH YOU IN BODY AT MOMENT."

"Does Verrick know?" Benteley demanded.

"YES."

"Eleanor Stevens?"

"YES."

Benteley's mind flashed anguish. "How do I know this is true? Prove it!"

"EXAMINE YOUR BODY. LOCATE POWER LEADS. TRACE CIRCUIT TO BOMB."

Benteley's fingers flew as he ripped at the synthetic chest. His mind flashed technical data as he found the main wiring that interlaced the body beneath the artificial layer of skin. He tore loose a whole section of material and probed deep in the humming circuit of the synthetic body, as Wakeman crouched a few feet away, heart frozen in his chest, clutching futilely for the good luck charm he had dropped in his office and never retrieved.

Benteley was wavering. The last clinging mist of loyalty to Verrick was rapidly fading. In its place hatred and disgust were forming. "So that's the way it's worked," he thought finally. An embryonic strategy flashed through his mind. "All right, Wakeman." His mind hardened. "I'm taking the body back. All the way to Farben."

Wakeman sagged. "Thank God," he said out loud.

Benteley leaped into activity. Realization that Moore was watching made his fingers a blur of motion as he inspected the reactor and jet controls, and then, without a sound, flashed the synthetic robot and ship up into the black sky, toward Earth.

The body had moved almost a quarter mile before Herb Moore sent the selector mechanism twitching. Shatteringly, without warning, Ted Benteley found himself sitting in his chair at Farben, surrounded by his protective ring.

On the miniature screen before him, the Pellig body hurtled back downward toward the moon-face in a wide arc. It located the suddenly scampering figure of Peter Wakeman and directed its thumb-gun. Wakeman saw what was coming. He stopped running

and stood, oddly calm and dignified, as the synthetic body dropped low, spun, and then incinerated him. Moore was in control again.

Benteley struggled up from his protective ring. He tore loose the wires that ran under his skin, his tongue, into his armpits and ears. In an instant he was at the door of the cubicle, reaching for the heavy steel handle.

The door was sealed.

He had expected it. Back at the humming banks of machinery, he tore loose a handful of relays. A flashing *pop* as the main power cables shorted, sending up acrid fumes and throwing the meters to a dead halt. The door fell open, its lock inoperative. Benteley raced down the hall toward Moore's central lab. On the way he crashed into a lounging Hill guard. Benteley knocked him down and grabbed the man's Popper. He turned the corner and plunged into the lab.

Moore lay limp and motionless within his own protective ring. Around him a group of his technicians were working on the second synthetic body, already partly assembled in the fluid baths suspended over the worktables. None of the technicians was armed.

Circling the lab was a honeycomb of chambers, small cubicles in which men sat at screens, eyes fixed intently, bodies supported by identical equipment. A momentary vision of mirror duplications of his own cube, the other operators, and then Benteley broke away. He waved the fluttering technicians back and glanced briefly into Moore's screen. The body hadn't reached the resort balloon; he was in time.

Benteley killed the limp, unprotesting body of Herb Moore.

The effect on the Pellig body was instantaneous. It gave a convulsive leap that carried it in a spinning trajectory off the Lunar surface. The body whirled and darted grotesquely, a crazed thing dancing a furious rhythm of death. Somewhere along the line, as the body swooped and soared, it managed to pull itself out and level off. Moore led the body upward, arced it in a vast sweeping circle, and then shot off for deep space.

On the screen, the Lunar surface receded. It dwindled and became a ball. Then a dot. Then it was gone.

The lab doors burst open. Verrick and Eleanor Stevens entered quickly. “What did you do?” Verrick demanded hoarsely. “He’s gone crazy; he’s heading away from …”

He saw the lifeless body of Herb Moore.

“So that’s it,” he said softly.

Benteley got out of the lab—fast. Verrick didn’t try to stop him; he stood aimlessly fumbling at Moore’s corpse, his massive face slack and vacant, numbed with shock.

Down the descent ramp Benteley raced. Reaching the ground, he plunged out onto the dark late-evening street. As a group of Farben personnel streamed hesitantly out after him, he entered the illuminated taxi yard and hailed one of the parked urbtrans ships.

“Where to, sir or madam?” the MacMillan driver asked, as it slid back its doors and gunned its turbines.

“To Bremen,” Benteley gasped. He snapped his seat-straps in place and quickly slotted his neck against the take-off impact. “And make it fast.”

The MacMillan’s metallic voice sounded in agreement as it operated its jet portions. The small high-speed ship which was its mechanical body shot swiftly into the sky, and Farben fell behind.

“Set me down at the big interplan field,” Benteley ordered. “Do you know any interplan flight schedules?”

“No, but I can hook you up to an information circuit.”

“Forget it,” Benteley said. He wondered briefly how much of his conversation with Wakeman had been picked up by the balance of the Corps. Whether he liked it or not, Luna was the only place he stood a chance of safety. All nine planets were now Hill-operated death traps: Verrick would never rest until he had paid him back. But there was no telling what reception he would get from the Directorate. He might be shot on sight as one of Verrick’s agents. On the other hand, he might be regarded as Cartwright’s savior.

Where was the synthetic body going?

"Here's the field, sir or madam," the driver said to him. The taxi was settling down at the public parking lot.

The field was manned by Hill personnel. Benteley could see intercon liners and interplan transports resting here and there, and great hordes of people. Among the people Hill guards moved around keeping order. Suddenly Benteley changed his mind.

"Don't set down. Head back up."

"You name it, sir or madam." The ship obediently rose.

"Isn't there a military field around someplace?"

"The Directorate maintains a small military repair field at Narvik. You want to go there? It's forbidden for non-military ships to set down in that area. I'll have to drop you over the side."

"Fine," Benteley said. "That sounds like exactly what I want."

Leon Cartwright was fully awake when the Corpsman came running to his quarters. "How far away is he?" Cartwright asked. Even with the injection of sodium pentathol he had slept only a few hours. "Pretty close, I suppose."

"Peter Wakeman is dead," the Corpsman said.

Cartwright got quickly to his feet. "Who killed him?"

"The assassin."

"Then he's here." Cartwright yanked out his hand weapon. "What kind of defense can we put up? How did he find me? What happened to the network at Batavia?"

Rita O'Neill entered the room, white-faced and quiet. "The Corps broke down completely. Pellig forced his way directly to the inner fortress and found you were gone."

Cartwright glanced briefly at her, then back at the Corpsman. "What happened to your people?"

“Our strategy failed,” the Corpsman said simply. “Verrick had some kind of deception. I think Wakeman had it analyzed before he died.”

Rita reacted. “Wakeman’s dead?”

“Pellig got him,” Cartwright said curtly. “That cuts us off from the Corps. We’re completely on our own.” He turned to the Corpsman. “What’s the exact situation? Have you definitely located the assassin?”

“Our emergency network has collapsed. When Wakeman was killed, we totally lost lock with Pellig. We have no idea where he is. We haven’t made any contact whatsoever.”

“If Pellig has got this far,” Cartwright said thoughtfully, “we don’t have much chance of stopping him.”

“Wakeman was handling it,” Rita blazed savagely. “You can do much better.”

“Why?”

“Because—” She shrugged impatiently. “Wakeman was nothing compared to you. He was a nonentity. A little *bureaucrat.*”

Cartwright showed her his gun. “Remember this? I had this popper in the back seat of the car for years. I never had to use it. It was still there; I sent a team to get it for me.” He ran his hand down the familiar metal tube. “Sentimental attachment, I suppose.”

“You’re going to defend yourself with that thing?” Rita’s black eyes smoldered furiously. “That’s all you’re going to do?”

“Right now I’m hungry,” Cartwright said mildly. “What time is it? We might as well have dinner while we’re waiting.”

“This isn’t the time—” Rita began, but at that moment the Corpsman cut her off.

“Mr. Cartwright,” he interrupted, “a ship from Earth is landing. Just a moment.” His attention turned inward and then he continued, “Major Shaeffer is aboard with the remaining Corpsmen. And—” He broke off. “There’s more. He wants to see you immediately.”

“Fine,” Cartwright said. “Where is he?”

“He’ll meet you here. He’s coming up the ramp right now.”

Cartwright fumbled in his coat pocket for his crumpled pack of cigarettes. “Strange,” he said to Rita. “Wakeman dead, after all his careful planning.”

“I’m not sorry for Wakeman. I only wish you’d do something instead of just standing there.”

“Well,” Cartwright said, “I can’t go anywhere. And we’ve tried everything we know. There’s not a hell of a lot left, when you get down to it. I can’t help thinking if one man is really determined to kill another, there’s not much that can be done to stop him. You can delay him, you can make it hard for him, you can do a lot of intricate things that take up a lot of time and energy, but sooner or later he shows up.”

“I think I liked you better when you were afraid,” Rita said bitterly. “At least I understood that.”

“Don’t you understand this?”

“You were afraid of death. Now you’re not human—you have no emotions. Maybe you’re dead. You might as well be dead.”

“I’ll make a concession,” Cartwright said. “I’ll sit facing the door.” He settled gingerly on the end of a table, his popper in his palm, a dispassionate expression on his face. “What does Pellig look like?” he asked the Corpsman.

“Young. Thin. Blond. No special characteristics.”

“What kind of weapon is he using?”

“He has a thumb-gun. That’s a heat beam principle. Of course he may have something more we don’t know about.”

“I want to recognize Pellig when I see him,” Cartwright explained to Rita. “He may be the next person through that door.”

The next person through the door was Major Shaeffer.

“I brought this man with me,” Shaeffer explained to Cartwright, as he entered the room. “I think you’ll want to talk to him.”

A dark, neatly-dressed classified man in his early thirties had entered slightly behind Shaeffer. He and Cartwright shook hands as Shaeffer briefly introduced them.

“This is Ted Benteley,” Shaeffer said. “A serf of Reese Verrick’s.”

“You’re a little premature,” Cartwright said. “You can go downramp to the pool and the game room and the bar. The assassin ought to be showing up any time, now; it won’t be long.”

Benteley laughed, sharply and tensely. He was more rumpled and on edge than they had first realized. “Shaeffer is incorrect,” he said. “I’m not under oath to Verrick any longer. I left him.”

“You broke your oath?” Cartwright asked.

“He broke his oath to me. I left in a considerable hurry. I came here directly from Farben. There were complications.”

“He killed Herb Moore,” Shaeffer said.

“Not exactly,” Benteley corrected. “I killed his body.”

Rita’s breath caught sharply. “What happened?”

Benteley explained the situation. When he was perhaps half through, Cartwright interrupted with a question. “Where’s Pellig? The last we heard he was around here, somewhere, not more than a few miles from the resort.”

“The Pellig body is on its way toward deep space,” Benteley said. “Moore isn’t interested in you; he’s got his own problems. When he realized he was stuck in the synthetic body, he left Luna and headed straight out.”

“Headed where?” Cartwright asked.

“I don’t know.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Rita said impatiently. “He’s not after you; that’s what’s important. Maybe he went insane. Maybe he’s lost control of the body.”

“It’s possible,” Benteley admitted. “It was an event he didn’t expect; he had just smashed your teep net.” He explained how Moore destroyed Peter Wakeman.

“We know that,” Cartwright said. “What kind of velocity is the synthetic capable of?”

“C-plus,” Benteley answered. “Aren’t you satisfied Moore is moving away from here?”

Cartwright licked his lips. “I know where he’s going.”

There was a quick murmur and then Shaeffer said, “Of course.” He rapidly scanned Cartwright’s mind. “He has to find some way to stay alive. Benteley gave me a lot of involuntary material on the way here; I can construct most of the missing parts. Moore will undoubtedly find Preston with the information he has.”

Benteley was astounded. “Preston! Is he alive?”

“That explains the prior informational request,” Cartwright said. “Verrick must have tapped the closed-circuit ipvic beam from the ship.” His cigarette came to an end; he dropped it, ground it out wrathfully, and lit another. “I should have paid more attention when Wakeman brought it up.”

“What could you have done?” Shaeffer asked.

“Our ship is close to Preston’s ship. Moore wouldn’t be interested in it, though.” Cartwright shook his head irritably. “Is there any way we can set up a screen to follow Moore?”

“I suppose so,” Benteley said. “Ipvic arranged a constant visual beam from the body back to Farben. We could cut into it; it’s still being relayed. I know the frequency of the channel.” A thought struck him. “Harry Tate’s under fief to Verrick.”

“Everybody seems to be under fief to Verrick,” Cartwright said. “Is there anybody at ipvic we can work with?”

“Put pressure on Tate. If you cut him off from Verrick, he’ll cooperate. He isn’t keen on this stuff, according to what Eleanor Stevens told me.”

Shaeffer looked into his mind with interest. “She told you a lot. Since she left us and went to Farben she’s been useful.”

“Yes, I’d like to keep some kind of a visual check on the Pellig body.” Cartwright fumbled with his popper and finally slid it into a

half-unpacked suitcase on the floor. “We’re better off now, of course. Thanks, Benteley.” He nodded vaguely to Benteley. “So things have changed. Pellig won’t be coming here. We don’t have to worry about that any more.”

Rita was eyeing Benteley intently. “You didn’t break your oath? You don’t consider that you’re a felon?”

“I told you,” Benteley said, returning her hard stare. “Verrick broke his oath to me. He released me by betraying me.”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

“Well,” Cartwright said. “I still want something to eat. Let’s have lunch or dinner or something, and you can explain the rest to us.” He moved toward the door, the ghost of a relieved smile on his tired face. “We have time, now. My first assassin is a closed book. We don’t have any reason to hurry.”

FOURTEEN

As they ate, Benteley put his feelings into words. “I killed Moore because I had no choice. In a few seconds he would have turned Pellig over to a technician and returned to his own body at Farben. Pellig would have gone on and detonated against you; some of Moore’s staff are that loyal.”

“How close would the body have had to be?” Cartwright asked.

“The body got within less than three miles of you. Two miles closer and Verrick would now dominate the known system.”

“No actual contact was necessary?”

“I had time for only a quick look at the wiring, but a standard proximity mechanism tuned to your brain pattern was wired into the circuit. And then there’s the power of the bomb itself. The law specifies no weapon a man can’t carry in one hand. The bomb was a regulation H-grenade from the last war.”

“The bomb *is*,” Cartwright reminded him.

“Everything depended on Pellig?” Rita asked.

“There was a second synthetic body. It’s about half complete. Nobody at Farben expected total disorganization of the Corps; they got more than they hoped for. But Moore is out of the picture. The second body will never go into operation; only Moore can bring it to its final stages. He kept everybody else down to lower levels—and Verrick knows that.”

“What happens when Moore reaches Preston?” Rita demanded. “Then Moore will be back in the picture again.”

“I didn’t know about Preston,” Benteley admitted. “I destroyed Moore’s body so he couldn’t leave the synthetic. If Preston is going

to help him he'll have to work fast. The synthetic won't last long in deep space."

"Why didn't you want him to kill me?" Cartwright inquired.

"I didn't care if he killed you. I wasn't thinking about you."

"That's not precisely true," Shaeffer said. "The thought *was* there, as a corollary. When you made your psychological break, you automatically switched against Verrick's strategy. You acted as an impeding agent, semi-voluntarily."

Benteley wasn't listening. "I was tricked from the beginning," he said. "All of them were mixed up in it; Verrick, Moore, Eleanor Stevens. From the moment I set foot in the lounge, Wakeman tried to warn me; he did what he could. I came to the Directorate to get away from rottenness. I wound up doing its work; Verrick gave me orders and I followed them. But what are you supposed to do in a society that's corrupt? Are you supposed to obey corrupt laws? Is it a crime to break a law that's a rotten law, or an oath that's rotten?"

"It's a crime," Cartwright admitted slowly. "But it may be the right thing to do."

"In a society of criminals," Shaeffer offered, "the innocent man goes to jail."

"Who decides when the society is made up of criminals?" Benteley demanded. "How do you know when your society has gone wrong? How do you know when it's right to stop obeying the laws?"

"You just know," Rita O'Neill said fiercely.

"You've got a built-in mechanism?" Benteley asked the woman. "That's great; I wish I had. I wish everybody had … It must be a hell of a handy thing. There's six billion of us living in this system, and most of us think the system works just fine. Am I supposed to go against everybody around me? They're all obeying the laws." He was thinking of Al and Laura Davis. "They're happy, contented, satisfied; they have good jobs; they eat well; they have a nice place to live. Eleanor Stevens said I had a sick mind. How do I know I'm not a sick misfit? A quasi-psychotic?"

“You have to have faith in yourself,” Rita O’Neill said.

“Everybody has that. That’s a dime a dozen. I stood the rottenness as long as I could and then I rebelled. Maybe they’re right; maybe I am a felon. I think Verrick broke his oath to me … I think I was released. But maybe I’m wrong.”

“If you’re wrong,” Shaeffer pointed out, “you can be shot on sight.”

“I know. But …” Benteley struggled up the words. “In a way that isn’t important. I never kept an oath because I was afraid of breaking it. I kept it because I didn’t think it should be broken. But I can only go so far. A point came when this whole thing sickened me so much I couldn’t work with it any more. I can’t stand to get it on my hands! Even if it means being hunted down and shot.”

“That may happen,” Cartwright said. “You say Verrick knew about the bomb?”

“That’s right.”

Cartwright reflected. “A protector isn’t supposed to send a classified serf to his death. That’s reserved for unks. He’s supposed to protect his classies, not destroy them. Judge Waring would know, I suppose; it takes an expert. You didn’t know Verrick had been quacked when you took your oath?”

“No. But they knew.”

Cartwright rubbed his grizzled jaw with the back of his hand. “Well, maybe you have a case. Maybe not. You’re an interesting person, Benteley. What are you going to do, now that you’ve tossed off the rules? Are you going to take a fealty oath again?”

“I don’t think so,” Benteley said.

“Why not?”

“A man shouldn’t become another man’s serf.”

“I don’t mean that.” Cartwright picked his words carefully. “What about a positional oath?”

“I don’t know.” Benteley shook his head wearily. “I’m tired. Maybe later on.”

Rita O’Neill spoke up. “You should join my uncle’s staff. You should swear on to him.”

They were all looking at him. Benteley said nothing for a while. “The Corps takes a positional oath, doesn’t it?” he asked presently.

“That’s right,” Shaeffer said. “That’s the oath Peter Wake-man thought so much of.”

“If you’re interested,” Cartwright said, his shrewd old eyes on Benteley, “I’ll swear you on to me—as Quizmaster—with a positional oath.”

“I never got my p-card back from Verrick,” Benteley said.

A fleeting, potent expression crossed Cartwright’s face. “Oh? Well, that can be repaired.” He reached in his coat and got out a small carefully-wrapped package. With slow, deliberate fingers he unwrapped the package and laid the contents on the table.

There were a dozen power cards.

Cartwright sorted through them, selected one, examined it intently, then replaced the others in the package and wrapped them up tight. He restored them to his pocket and passed the single p-card to Benteley. “Two dollars does it. And you can keep it; I won’t collect it back. You should have one; everybody ought to have an even chance in the great game.”

Benteley got slowly to his feet. He dug in his wallet and presently tossed two paper dollars down. He pocketed the p-card and stood waiting as Cartwright rose. “This feels familiar,” Benteley said.

“You know,” Cartwright said, “I haven’t any idea how the oath goes. Somebody’ll have to help me out.”

“I know it,” Benteley said. With Rita O’Neill and Shaeffer watching silently, he recited the positional oath to Quizmaster Cartwright and then abruptly took his seat. His coffee was cold but he drank it anyhow. He barely tasted it; he was deep in thought.

“Now you’re part of us officially,” Rita O’Neill said.

Benteley grunted.

The woman's eyes were dark and intense. "You saved my uncle's life. You saved all our lives; the body would have blown this resort to fragments."

"Leave him alone," Shaeffer said to her warningly.

Rita ignored him. Leaning toward Benteley, her strong face avid, she continued, "You should have killed Verrick while you were at it. You could have. He was there, too."

Benteley threw down his fork. "I'm through eating." He got to his feet and left the table. "If nobody minds, I'll be outside walking around."

He strode out of the dining room and into the corridor. A few Directorate officials stood here and there talking softly. Benteley wandered aimlessly around, his mind in turmoil.

After a while Rita O'Neill appeared at the doorway. She stood watching him, her arms folded tautly. "I'm sorry," she said presently.

"It's all right."

She came up beside him, breathing rapidly, red lips half-parted. "I shouldn't have said that. You've done enough." She put her quick, feverish fingers on Benteley's arm. "Thanks."

Benteley pulled away. "I broke my oath to Verrick; let's face it. But that's all I can do. I killed Moore—he was as soulless as he is bodyless. He's nothing but a calculating intellect, not a man. But I'm not going to touch Reese Verrick."

Rita's black eyes blazed. "Common sense ought to tell you better than that. You're so noble and full of ethics! Don't you know what Verrick would do to you if he caught you?"

"You don't know when to stop. I swore on to your uncle; isn't that enough? On paper I'm a felon; I broke a law. But I don't consider myself a criminal." He faced her defiantly. "Understand?"

Rita retreated. "I don't consider you a felon, either." She hesitated uncertainly. "Will you try to tell him what to do?"

“Cartwright? Of course not.”

“You’ll let him run things himself? Wakeman wouldn’t let him. He has to run things; you can’t interfere.”

“I never told anybody what to do in my life. All I want to do is—” Benteley shrugged angrily, unhappily. “I don’t know. Be another Al Davis, I suppose. Have my house and a good job. Mind my own business.” His voice rose in despair. “But goddamn it, not in this system. I want to be an Al Davis in some world where I can obey the laws, not break them. I want to obey the laws! I want to respect them. I want to respect the person around me.”

Rita was silent a moment. “You respect my uncle. You will, if you don’t now.” She broke off, embarrassed. “Don’t you respect me?”

“Sure,” Benteley said.

“Do you mean it?”

Benteley grinned crookedly. “Of course. In fact …”

At the end of the hall Major Shaeffer appeared. He shouted at Benteley, faint and shrill. “Benteley, *run*!”

Benteley stood paralyzed. Then he jerked away from Rita O’Neill. “Get in there with your uncle.” He yanked out his popper.

“But what—”

Benteley turned and raced down the corridor to the descent ramp. Corpsmen and Directorate officials scurried everywhere. He reached the ground level and ran desperately toward the balloon-wall.

It was too late.

A clumsy figure in a half-removed Farley suit blocked his way. Eleanor Stevens, red hair flaming, face pale, gasping for breath, hurried up beside him. “Get out of here,” she panted. In the heavy unfamiliar suit, she stumbled over a supply-carrier and half-fell against the wall. “Ted,” she wailed. “Don’t try to fight him; just run. If he gets you—”

“I know,” Benteley said. “He’ll kill me.”

At the entrance-sphincter of the balloon, a single high-velocity Hill transport had landed on the arid surface. Passengers were climbing out; a small knot of bulky figures was moving cautiously toward the resort.

Reese Verrick had arrived.

FIFTEEN

Leon Cartwright moved toward the entrance-sphincter.

"You had better disappear for a while," he said to Benteley. "I'll talk to Verrick."

Shaeffer gave rapid instructions; a group of Corpsmen came hurrying up, accompanied by a handful of Directorate officials. "It isn't really worth it," Shaeffer said to Cartwright. "He might as well stay here. He can't leave the resort and Verrick knows he's here. We might as well get this thrashed out."

"Verrick can just walk in here?" Benteley asked helplessly.

"Of course," Cartwright answered. "This is a public resort. He's not an assassin; he's an ordinary citizen."

"Do you mind being present?" Shaeffer asked Benteley. "It may be —difficult."

"I'll stay," Benteley said.

Verrick and his small group pushed slowly through the wide entrance-sphincter. Removing their suits, they glanced cautiously around.

"Hello, Verrick," Cartwright said. The two of them shook hands. "Come on inside and have a cup of coffee. We were eating."

"Thanks," Verrick answered. "Yes, if you don't mind." He looked haggard, but calm. His voice was low; he followed Cartwright obediently up the corridor toward the dining-room. "You know, don't you, that Pellig has left?"

"I know," Cartwright said. "He's heading out toward John Preston's ship."

The others followed after the two of them as they entered the dining-room and seated themselves. MacMillans had cleared the table; they rapidly reset cups and saucers. Benteley seated himself beside Rita O'Neill at the far end of the table from Verrick. Verrick saw him but he gave no sign beyond a momentary flicker of recognition. Shaeffer, the other Corpsmen and Directorate officials, took seats in the background and listened and watched respectfully.

"I suppose he'll find it," Verrick murmured. "When I left Farben, he was already thirty-nine astronomical units out; I checked with the ipvic monitor. Thanks." He accepted black coffee and sipped it with relief. "A hell of a lot has happened, today."

"What would Moore do if he got hold of Preston's material?" Cartwright asked. "You know him better than I do."

"It's hard to say. Moore was always a lone wolf. He was in it for himself … I provided him with materials and he worked away on his projects. He's brilliant."

"I got that impression. Didn't he engineer the whole Pellig project?"

"It was all his idea. I went out and hired him; I knew he was good. I didn't try to tell him what to do."

Eleanor Stevens had come quietly into the dining-room. She stood, nervous and uncertain, her small thin hands clasped tightly together. After a moment of anxious indecision she slipped into a seat in the dim recesses of the room and watched wide-eyed, a demure and terrified shape half-lost in the shadows.

"I wondered where you went," Verrick said to her. "You beat me here by—" He examined his watch. "Only a few minutes."

"Will Moore go back to you if he gets what he wants?" Cartwright asked.

"I doubt it. There wouldn't be any real reason."

"His oath?"

"He never worried about that sort of thing." Verrick's deep-set eyes strayed vaguely. "It seems to be the fashion among the bright

young men. I suppose oaths don't seem as important as they did, once."

Benteley said nothing. Under his fingers his hand-weapon was cold and moist with perspiration. His coffee cooled beside him, untouched. Rita O'Neill smoked convulsively, stubbed her cigarette out, lit another and then stubbed out that.

"Are you going to call a second Challenge Convention?" Cartwright asked Verrick.

"Oh, I don't know. Not for a while." Verrick made an intricate pyramid with his massive hands, studied it, then dissolved it back into individual fingers. He gazed absently around the dining-room. "I don't remember this place. It's Directorate property, isn't it?"

Shaeffer answered. "We always arrange something in advance. You'll recall the interplan station we fixed for you outside Mars. That was constructed during Robinson's reign."

"Robinson." Verrick mused cloudily. "I remember him. God, that was ten years ago. Has it really been that long?"

"Why did you come here?" Rita O'Neill's voice cracked out.

Verrick's shaggy eyebrows pulled together in a weary frown. He didn't know Rita, obviously. He turned to Cartwright for an explanation. "My niece," Cartwright said. He introduced them; Rita glared down at her coffee cup and said nothing. Her lips turned white and she clenched her fists until Verrick forgot her and went back to pyramiding his fingers and brooding.

"Of course," Verrick said finally, "I don't know what Benteley has told you. I suppose you understand my set-up, by now."

"What Benteley didn't tell me orally, Shaeffer scanned," Cartwright answered.

Verrick muttered obscurely. "Then you know all I have to say by way of explanation," he finished. He raised his massive head. "Can I take that for granted?"

"Yes," Cartwright said, nodding. "Of course."

“I don’t intend to bring in anything to do with Herb Moore. As far as I’m concerned that’s over and finished.” Verrick struggled with his pocket and finally brought out a massive Hopper popper, which he propped upright against his water glass and napkin ring. “I can’t very well kill Benteley here at the table. I’ll wait until later on.” A thought struck him. “I don’t have to kill him here at the resort. He can go back with me and I’ll kill him along the way, somewhere.”

Shaeffer and Cartwright exchanged glances. Verrick took no interest; he gazed down broodingly at his popper and paw-like hands.

“That really doesn’t matter,” Cartwright said. “But we should clear up one thing. Benteley is presently under oath to me, as Quizmaster. He took a positional oath.”

“But he can’t,” Verrick said. “He broke his oath to me; that negates his freedom to swear on.”

“Well,” Cartwright said, “I don’t consider that he broke his oath to you.”

“You betrayed him,” Shaeffer explained to Verrick.

Verrick reflected at length. “I’m not conscious of any betrayal. I performed the duties and obligations due from my end.”

“That’s not even remotely true,” Shaeffer contradicted.

There was a moment of silence.

Verrick grunted, retrieved his popper, examined it, and then shoved it back in his coat pocket. “We’ll have to get advice on this,” he murmured. “Let’s try to get Judge Waring up here.”

“Fine,” Cartwright agreed. “That’s satisfactory. Do you want to stay here during the interval?”

“Thanks,” Verrick said appreciatively. “I’m tired as hell. What I need is a good long rest.” He gazed around him. “This looks like just the place.”

Judge Felix Waring was a grouchy, hunched-over old gnome in a moth-eaten black suit and old-fashioned hat, a heavy legal binder under his arm. He was the highest ranking jurist in the system; and he had a long white beard.

"I know who you are," he muttered curtly, glancing at Cartwright. "And you, too." He nodded briefly at Verrick. "You and your million gold dollars. That Pellig of yours was a fizzle, wasn't he?" He cackled gleefully. "I never liked the looks of him. I knew he was no good. He didn't have a muscle on him."

It was "morning" in the resort.

The ship that had brought Judge Waring had quietly disgorged MacMillan newsmachines, Hill officials, and more Directorate bureaucrats. Ipvic technicians came in their own ship; a steady stream of workmen moved through the sphincters into the balloon. Signalmen with tangled reels of communication wiring thrown over their shoulders wandered everywhere, stringing up ipvic tv equipment. Toward the middle of the day the resort became a hive of noisy, determined activity. Motion was everywhere, figures coming and going with serious expressions.

"How's this?" a Directorate official was saying to one of the ipvic men.

"Not big enough. What about that place over there?"

"That's the main game room."

"That'll be fine." Equipment was waved toward the entrance arch. "The acoustics will be blurred but that's okay, isn't it?"

"Not on your life. We want no boom; use something smaller."

"Don't step through the balloon," a soldier warned a work-crew setting up transmission equipment.

"It's pretty tough," a technician said. "This place was made to handle tourists and drunks."

The central game room had rapidly filled with men and women in bright-colored vacation clothes. They scampered and played and amused themselves as the technicians and work-crews laid out

tables and machinery. MacMillans were everywhere, getting underfoot and blundering among the game-players.

Benteley stood off in a corner watching gloomily. The laughing, gaily-clad men and women sprinted back and forth; shuffleboard was a popular sport, as well as softball and soccer. No purely intellectual games were permitted. This was a psych resort: the games were therapeutic. A few feet from Benteley a purple-haired young girl was determinedly hunched over a three-dimensional color board, forming elaborate combinations of shapes, tones, and textures, with sharp little quivers of her hands.

"It's nice, here," Rita O'Neill said in his ear.

Benteley nodded.

"We still have some time before they begin." Rita meditatively tossed a garishly-painted disc into the middle of a flock of robot ducks. One duck dutifully fell dead, and a score rang itself up on the marker. "You want to play something? Exercise and enjoy yourself? I'm dying to try some of these things out."

The two of them edged through the people and into the side gym, Rita leading the way. Directorate soldiers had stripped off their green uniforms and were tilting with magnetic fields, pressure beams, artificial high-grav steps, a variety of muscle-building equipment. In the center of the room an interested group was watching a Corpsman wrestle a MacMillan robot.

"Very healthful," Benteley said grimly.

"Oh, this is a wonderful place. Don't you think Leon has put on weight? He looks a lot better since the Pellig business ended."

"He'll probably live to be an old man," Benteley agreed.

Rita flushed. "There's no need for that. You can't really be loyal to anybody, can you? You're only thinking of yourself."

Benteley moved on; after a moment Rita followed. "Is Judge Waring going to make his decision with all these enthusiasts running around?" Benteley demanded. He had come to a raised web on which tanned figures were stretching out in the sun. "Everybody

seems to be having a wonderful time. Even the MacMillans are enjoying themselves. The menace is past. The assassin has departed."

Rita happily took off her clothes, gave them to a mechanical attendant, and tossed herself into one of the quavering webs. Low-grav counterfields released her body; she spun dizzily into the depths of the web and after a time emerged, breathless and flushed, clutching wildly for something to hang on to.

Benteley pulled her to a standing position. "Take it easy."

"I forgot about the low grav." Laughing and excited, she pulled away from him and aimed herself for a deeper section of the web. "Come on, it's fun! I never realized before."

"I'll watch," Benteley said gloomily.

The woman's lithe body disappeared for a time. The web vibrated and bounced; eventually she emerged to the surface and lay stretched languidly out, the artificial sun gleaming from her perspiring back and shoulders. Closing her eyes, she yawned gratefully.

"It's good to rest," she murmured drowsily.

"This is the place for it," Benteley paraphrased Verrick. "If you have nothing else on your mind."

There was no answer. Rita was asleep.

Benteley stood with his hands in his pockets, surrounded by a blur of joyful color and motion. Laughing people romped by him; ceaseless games were started and restarted. In a corner Leon Cartwright was talking with a barrel-chested grim-faced man. Harry Tate, president of the Inter-plan Visual Industries Corporation, was congratulating Cartwright on his successful bout with his first assassin. Benteley gazed at the two of them until they separated. Finally he turned away from the webs—and found himself facing Eleanor Stevens.

"Who is she?" Eleanor asked in a bright, clipped voice.

"Cartwright's niece."

“Have you known her very long?”

“I just met her.”

“She’s pretty. She’s older than I, isn’t she?” Eleanor’s small face was frigid as metal; she smiled up at him like a merry tin doll. “She must be thirty, at least.”

“Not quite,” Benteley said.

Eleanor shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.” She started away suddenly; after a moment Benteley warily followed. “Want a drink?” she said over her shoulder. “It’s so damn hot in here. All the yelling gives me a headache.”

“No, thanks,” Benteley said, as Eleanor hastily scooped a martini from a wall-tray. “I want to stay sober.”

Eleanor strolled along, turning the tall glass this way and that between her thin fingers. “They’re about to start. They’re going to let that stupid old goat decide.”

“I know,” Benteley said listlessly.

“He hardly knows what’s going on. Verrick pulled the wool over his eyes at the Convention; he’ll do it again. Has there been any news about Moore?”

“Ipvic has their screen set up here, for Cartwright’s use. Verrick doesn’t care; he didn’t interfere.”

“What does it show?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t bothered to look.” Benteley came to a halt. Through a half-open door he had caught a glimpse of a table and chairs, ashtrays, recording instruments. “Is that—”

“That’s the room they set up.” Suddenly Eleanor gave a cry of terror. “*Ted, please get me out of here*!”

Reese Verrick had moved past the door of the room.

“He knows,” Eleanor said icily, as she pushed aimlessly among the laughing people. “I came to warn you—remember? Ted, he knows.”

“Too bad,” Benteley said vaguely.

“Don’t you care?”

“I’m sorry,” Benteley said. “There’s nothing I can do to Reese Verrick. If there was, I suppose I’d do it. Maybe not.”

“You can kill him!” Her voice was shrill with hysteria. “You have a gun. You can kill him before he kills both of us!”

“No,” Benteley said. “I’m not going to kill Reese Verrick. That’s out. I’ll wait and see what happens. In any case, I’m finished with that.”

“And … with me?”

“You knew about the bomb.”

Eleanor shuddered. “What could I do?” She hurried after him, frantic with apprehension. “Ted, I couldn’t stop it, could I?”

“You knew that night when we were together. When you talked me into it.”

“Yes!” Eleanor slid defiantly in front of him, blocking his way. “That’s right.” Her green eyes glittered wildly. “I knew. But I meant everything I said to you. I meant it all, Ted.”

“Christ,” Benteley muttered. He turned away, disgusted.

“Listen to me.” She caught imploringly at his arm. “Reese knew, too. Everybody knew. It couldn’t be helped—somebody had to be in it, didn’t they? Answer me!” She stumbled after him. “Answer me!” she screamed.

Benteley stepped back, as a grumbling white-bearded little old man pushed angrily past him toward the ante-chamber. He disappeared inside the room and dropped his heavy book on the table with a thump. He blew his nose, moved critically around examining the chairs and finally took a seat at the head of the table. Reese Verrick, standing glumly at the windows, exchanged a few words with him. A moment later Leon Cartwright followed after Judge Waring.

Benteley’s heart resumed beating, slowly and reluctantly. The session was ready to begin.

SIXTEEN

There were five people in the room.

Judge Waring sat at one end of the table, surrounded by his law books and tapes. Leon Cartwright faced the massive, ponderous figure of Reese Verrick, separated by two heaped ashtrays and an ugly pitcher of ice water. Benteley and Major Shaeffer sat across from each other at the low end of the table. The final chair was empty; Oster, the ipvic technicians, the Directorate officials, the Hill brass, had been barred. They were in the game room and the gym and basking around the pool. Through the heavy wood door of the ante-chamber filtered the faint vibrations of men and women at play.

"No smoking," Judge Waring muttered. He glared suspiciously from Verrick to Cartwright and back to Verrick. "Is the recording business going?"

"Yes," Shaeffer said.

The recording robot crept agilely along the table and took up a position in front of Reese Verrick. "Thanks," Verrick said, as he collected his papers and prepared to begin.

"Is this the fellow?" Waring asked, indicating Benteley.

"He's the one I came for," Verrick said, with a brief glance at Benteley. "But he's not the only one. They're all breaking their oaths, turning disloyal and betraying me." His voice trailed off vaguely. "Certainly not like the old days." He roused himself and quietly delivered his statement. "Benteley was dropped by Oiseau-Lyre. He was a derelict classified without a position. He came to me at Batavia looking for an 8–8 position; that's his class. Things were bad for me, at that time. I didn't know what lay ahead; I was

thinking I might have to lay off some of my own staff. Anyhow, I took him on, in spite of my own uncertainty. I took him into my household, gave him an apartment at Farben."

Shaeffer shot a quick glance at Cartwright; he was ahead of Verrick's spoken words.

"Everything was in disorder, but I gave Benteley what he wanted. I put him on my biochemist research staff. I gave him a woman to sleep with, fed him, and took care of him. I brought him into my biggest project." Verrick raised his voice a trifle. "He was given a responsible position in the project, at his own insistence. He stated he wanted to get in on policy-level. I trusted him and gave him what he asked for. At the crucial moment he betrayed me. He killed his immediate superior, dropped his work, and fled. He was too cowardly to go on, so he broke his oath. The critical project collapsed because of him. He came here aboard a Directorate ship and tried to swear on to the Quizmaster."

Verrick was silent. He had finished.

Benteley heard the words with a kind of dull growing surprise. Was that what had happened? Waring was looking at him curiously, waiting for him to speak. Benteley shrugged; he had nothing to say. It was out of his hands entirely.

Cartwright spoke up. "What was Benteley's job in this project?"

Verrick hesitated. "He was doing substantially the same work as the other class 8–8 people."

"Was there any difference?"

Verrick was silent a moment. "Not that I can recall."

"That's a lie," Shaeffer said to Judge Waring. "He knows of a difference."

Verrick nodded reluctantly. "There was one difference," he admitted. "Benteley asked for and got the initial position. He would have taken the project to its final stage. He was trusted completely."

"What was that stage?" Judge Waring asked.

"Benteley's death," Cartwright answered.

Verrick didn't contradict him. He examined his papers moodily until finally Judge Waring asked, "Is that true?"

Verrick nodded.

"Did Benteley know?" Judge Waring demanded.

"Not at first. It wasn't possible to make the information available to him immediately; he had just arrived on the staff. He betrayed me when he found out." Verrick's heavy hands gripped his papers convulsively. "He destroyed the project. They all pulled out; they all let me down."

"Who else betrayed you?" Shaeffer asked curiously.

Verrick's strong jaw moved. "Eleanor Stevens. Herb Moore."

"Oh," Shaeffer said. "I thought Moore was the man Benteley killed."

Verrick nodded. "Moore was his immediate superior. He was in charge of the project."

"If Benteley killed Moore, and Moore had betrayed you …" Shaeffer turned to Judge Waring. "It sounds as if Benteley was acting as a loyal serf."

Verrick snorted. "Moore betrayed me afterwards. After Benteley —" He broke off.

"Go on," Shaeffer said.

"After Benteley killed him," Verrick said woodenly, and with difficulty.

"What's that?" Judge Waring asked testily. "I don't understand."

"Tell him what the project was," Shaeffer suggested mildly. "Then he'll understand."

Verrick studied the table in front of him. He dog-eared a paper and finally spoke. "I have nothing more to say." He got slowly to his feet. "I withdraw the material relating to Moore's death. That really isn't relevant."

"What do you stand on?" Cartwright asked.

“Benteley pulled out and dropped his work. He left the job I assigned him, the job he took on when he swore on to me.”

“Yes,” Verrick agreed. “But he should have stayed. It was his job.”

Cartwright also rose. “I have nothing else to say,” he said to Judge Waring. “I swore Benteley on because I considered him legitimately free of his prior oath to Verrick. I considered the oath broken by Verrick. Benteley was sent to his death without knowledge. A protector isn’t supposed to send a classified serf to involuntary death. If the serf has a classification, he must get that serf’s written agreement.”

Judge Waring’s beard bobbed up and down. “A classified serf must agree. A protector can only destroy his classified serf on an involuntary basis if the serf has broken his oath. In breaking his oath, the serf forfeits his rights but remains his protector’s property.” Judge Waring gathered up his law books and tapes. “The case here rests on one point. If the protector in question broke his side of the oath first, the serf in question was legally within his rights to drop his work and leave. But if the protector did not break his side of the oath prior to the serf’s departure, then the serf is a felon and liable to the death penalty.”

Cartwright moved toward the door. Verrick followed after him, his heavy face dark and brooding, hands shoved deep in his pockets. “That’s it, then,” Cartwright said. “We’ll wait for your decision.”

* * *

Benteley was with Rita O’Neill when the decision came. Shaeffer approached him briefly. “I’ve been scanning old Judge Waring,” he said. “He’s finally made up his mind.”

It was “evening” in the resort. Benteley and Rita were sitting in one of the small side-bars of the resort, two vague shapes in the dim color-twisting shadows that hung around their table. A single aluminum candle sputtered between them. Directorate officials were sitting here and there in the room, murmuring, gazing vacantly

ahead, sipping their drinks. A MacMillan moved silently around. “Well?” Benteley said. “What is it?”

“It’s in your favor,” Shaeffer said. “He’ll announce it in a few minutes. Cartwright told me to let you know as soon as possible.”

“Then Verrick has no claim over me,” Benteley said wonderingly. “I’m safe.”

“That’s right.” Shaeffer moved away from the table. “Congratulations.” He disappeared through the entrance and was gone.

Rita put her hand on Benteley’s. “Thank heavens.”

Benteley felt no emotion, only an empty sort of daze. “I guess that settles it,” he murmured. He absently watched a flow of color move up the side of the wall, hover against the ceiling and then re-descend like a fluid spider. It dissolved back into basic swirls and dabs, then formed once more and started its slow crawl back up.

“We should celebrate,” Rita said.

“Yes, I’m where I wanted to be.” Benteley sipped the remains of his drink. “Working for the Directorate. Sworn in to the Quizmaster. This is what I set out for, that day. It seems like a long time ago. Well, I’ve finally arrived.” He gazed down at his glass and was silent.

“How do you feel?”

“Not much different.”

Rita tore apart a match folder and fed the fragments to the metallic candle. “You’re not satisfied, are you?”

“I’m as far from satisfaction as it’s humanly possible to be.”

“Why?” she asked softly.

“I haven’t really done anything. I thought it was the Hills, but Wakeman was right. It isn’t the Hills—it’s the whole society. The stench is everywhere. Getting away from the Hill system doesn’t help me or anybody else.” He pushed his drink angrily away. “I could simply hold my nose and pretend it isn’t there. But that isn’t

enough. Something has to be done about it. The whole weak, bright thing has to be pulled down. It's rotten, corrupt … it's ready to fall on its face. But something has to go up in its place; something has to be built. Tearing down isn't enough. *I've got to help build up the new.* It has to be different for other people. I'd like to do something that really alters things. I have to do something that alters things."

"Maybe you can."

Benteley looked ahead into the future, from where he was sitting. "How? Where'll the chance come from? I'm still a serf. I'm still tied down and under oath."

"You're young. We're both young. We've got a lot of years ahead of us to do things and plan things." Rita lifted her glass. "We've a whole lifetime to alter the course of the universe."

Benteley smiled. "Okay. I'll drink to that." He raised his own glass and touched hers with a clear clink. "But not too much." His smile ebbed away. "Verrick is still hanging around. I'll wait until he leaves to do my drinking."

Rita finished feeding bits of paper to the white-hot candle flame. "What would happen if he killed you?"

"They'd shoot him."

"What would happen if he killed my uncle?"

"They'd take away his power card. He'd never be Quizmaster."

"He won't be Quizmaster anyhow," Rita said quietly.

"What's on your mind?" Benteley roused himself. "What are you thinking?"

"I don't believe he'll go back empty-handed. He can't stop at this point." She glanced up at him, dark-eyed and serious. "It's not over, Ted. He has to kill somebody."

Benteley started to answer. At that moment a slim shadow fell over the table. He glanced up, one hand in his pocket, against the cold heel of his gun.

"Hello," Eleanor Stevens said. "Mind if I join you?"

She sat down quietly facing them, hands folded calmly in front of her, a fixed, mechanical smile on her lips. Her green eyes flashed brightly at Benteley and then at Rita. In the half-shadows of the bar her hair glowed a deep rust red, soft and heavy against her bare neck and shoulders.

“Who are you?” Rita said.

Green eyes dancing, Eleanor leaned forward to light her cigarette from the candle. “Just a name. Not really a person, any more. Isn’t that right, Ted?”

“You better get out of here,” Benteley said. “I don’t think Verrick wants you with us.”

“I haven’t seen Verrick since I got here. Except at a distance. Maybe I’ll leave him. Maybe I’ll just walk off; everybody else seems to be doing it.”

“Be careful,” Benteley said.

“Careful? About what?” Eleanor blew a cloud of gray smoke around Benteley and Rita. “I couldn’t help hearing what you were saying. You’re right.” Her eyes were fixed intently on Rita; she spoke rapidly in a sharp, brittle voice. “Verrick is trying to decide. He wants you, Ted, but he’ll settle for Cartwright if he can’t get you. He’s down in his quarters trying to make up his mind. He used to have Moore around to arrange things in a neat mathematical equation. Assign an arbitrary value of plus 50 for killing Benteley. But minus 100 for being shot in retribution. Assign an arbitrary value of plus 40 for killing Cartwright. But a minus 50 for losing his power card. Both ways he loses.”

“That’s right,” Benteley said warily. “He loses both ways.”

“Here’s another,” Eleanor said brightly. “I thought this one up myself.” She nodded merrily to Rita. “I mean, you thought it up. But I made up the equation. Assign an arbitrary value of plus 40 for killing Cartwright. And then try this: assign a minus 100 by Cartwright for being killed. That takes care of that part; that’s for Reese. Then there’s my own, but that’s not much.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” Rita said indifferently.

“I do,” Benteley said. *“Look out!”*

Eleanor had already moved. On her feet like a silent cat, she grabbed up the aluminum candle and ground the tube of bubbling flame into Rita’s face.

Benteley slammed the candle away; with a tinny grumble it rolled from the table and clanked onto the floor. Soundlessly, Eleanor slipped around the table to Rita O’Neill. Rita sat pawing helplessly at her eyes. Her black hair and skin were smoking and charred; the acrid odor of seared flesh filled the murky air of the bar. Eleanor yanked the woman’s hand away. Something glittered between the girl’s fingers, a jagged scarf-pin that came swiftly up at Rita’s eyes. Benteley hurled the girl away; she clung to him desperately, clawing and stabbing blindly until he shook her loose. Green eyes wild and glazed, she spun away and vanished into the black shadows of the room.

Benteley turned quickly to Rita O’Neill. “I’m all right,” Rita said between clenched teeth. “Thanks. The candle went out and she didn’t get me with the pin. Better try to catch her.”

People on all sides were leaping up and hurrying over. Eleanor had already disappeared from the bar, out into the corridor. A MacMillan medical attendant wheeled efficiently from its emergency locker, into the bar and over to the table. Rapidly, it cleared the people back, Benteley along with the others.

“Go on,” Rita said patiently, her hands over her face, elbows resting against the table. “You know where she’s going. Try to stop her. You know what he’ll do to her.”

Benteley left the bar. The corridor was deserted. He began to run toward the descent lift. A moment later he emerged on the ground level of the resort. A few people stood around here and there. At the far end of the corridor he glimpsed a flash of green and red; he raced forward. He turned a corner—and stopped dead.

Eleanor Stevens stood facing Reese Verrick. “Listen to me,” she was saying. “Don’t you understand? *It’s the only way.*” Her voice rose in shrill panic. “Reese, for God’s sake believe me. Take me back! I’m sorry. I won’t do it again. I left you but I won’t do it again. I’m bringing you this, aren’t I?”

Verrick saw Benteley. He smiled slightly and reached out to take firm hold of Eleanor’s wrist with his iron-hard fingers. “We’re back together. All three of us.”

“You’ve got it wrong,” Benteley said to him. “She didn’t mean to betray you. She’s completely loyal to you.”

“I don’t think so,” Verrick said. “She isn’t worth anything. She’s treacherous, childish. She’s no good.”

“Then let her go.”

Verrick considered. “No,” he said finally. “I’m not going to let her go.”

“Reese!” the girl wailed. “I told you what they said! I told you how you can do it. Don’t you understand? You can do it, now. I made it possible. Take me back, please take me back!”

“Yes,” Verrick admitted, “I can do it. But I had already worked it out.”

Benteley stepped in fast. But this time not fast enough.

“Ted!” Eleanor screamed. “Help me!”

Verrick swept her up and lugged her in three giant strides to a supply-sphincter. Beyond the transparent balloon the dead, bleak surface of the moon stretched out. Verrick lifted the screaming, struggling girl high and with one quick shove, threw her sprawling through the sphincter, outside the balloon.

Benteley stood paralyzed, as Verrick stepped away from the sphincter. The girl stumbled and fell into the rubble and heaps of frigid rock, arms flailing, her breath a frozen cloud hanging from her mouth and nose. She tried to drag herself to her feet; her body half-turned toward the balloon, face distorted, eyes bulging. For one

pleading instant she crept like a mashed insect toward Benteley, hands groping, clutching futilely.

Then her chest and visceral cavity burst. Benteley closed his eyes as an expanding mass of rupturing, lashing organs burst into the airless void of the Lunar surface, a sickening explosion of organic parts that immediately solidified to brittle crystals. It was over. The girl was dead.

Numbed, Benteley plucked out his hand weapon. People were racing up the corridor; an emergency alarm was wailing unhappily up and down. Verrick stood unmoving, without any particular expression.

Shaeffer knocked Benteley's popper from his numb hand. "No good—she's dead. She's dead!"

Benteley nodded. "Yes, I know."

Shaeffer bent to pick up the gun. "I'll keep this."

"He's going to get away with it," Benteley said.

"It's legal," Shaeffer agreed. "She wasn't classified."

Benteley moved away. Vaguely, he made his way back to the ramp in the direction of the infirmary. Images of the dead girl drifted around him, mixed with the burning face of Rita O'Neill and the cold dead horror of the moon's surface. He stumbled onto the ascent ramp and started dully up.

Footsteps and hoarse, heavy breathing sounded behind him. The ramp shuddered under a ponderous weight. Verrick had followed.

"Wait a minute, Benteley," he said. "I'll come along with you. I have an arrangement I want to discuss with Cartwright, a business transaction I think he'll be interested in."

Verrick waited until Judge Waring, muttering and fumbling with his chair, had finally seated himself. Across from him Cartwright sat straight and white-faced, still coming out of shock.

"How's your niece?" Verrick asked.

“She’ll be all right,” Cartwright said. “Thanks to Benteley.”

“Yes,” Verrick agreed. “I always thought Benteley had something. I knew he could act when it was necessary. It was her face Eleanor struck for?”

“They can fix her up with artigraft. It didn’t get to her eyes; mostly her skin and hair. It was her eyes the girl was after.”

Benteley couldn’t stop looking at Reese Verrick. Verrick seemed calm and collected. His breathing had returned to normal; his face had a gray, mottled look but his hands had stopped trembling. It was as if he were recovering his strength from an orgy of sexual passion, a spasm of total release, brief and overwhelming.

“What do you want?” Cartwright asked him. He turned to Judge Waring. “I don’t know what this is about.”

“No,” Judge Waring agreed crossly. “What is this, Reese? What have you got on your mind?”

“I want you to be here,” Verrick said to him. “I have a proposal to offer Cartwright. I want you to hear it out and see that it’s legal.” He got out his massive popper and placed it on the table in front of him. “We’ve come to a dead end. I think nobody will disagree. You can’t kill me, Leon. I’m not an assassin; it would be murder and you’d be liable. I’m here as a guest.”

“You’re perfectly welcome,” Cartwright said tonelessly, not taking his eyes from Verrick.

“I came here to kill Benteley, but I can’t. Stalemate. Stalemate on all sides: you can’t kill me, I can’t kill Benteley, and I can’t kill you.”

Silence.

“Or can I?” Verrick said thoughtfully. He examined his popper. “I think maybe I will.”

Judge Waring spoke up disgustedly. “You’ll be out of the M-game the rest of your life. That’s a stupid thing to do. What’ll it get you?”

“Pleasure. Satisfaction.”

“Will it be any satisfaction to lose your p-card?” Judge Waring demanded.

“No,” Verrick admitted. “But I have my three Hills. That won’t be affected.”

Cartwright didn’t stir. He nodded slightly, following Verrick’s line of reasoning. “At least you’d come out of this alive. You’d be that much ahead of me, wouldn’t you?”

“That’s right,” Verrick agreed. “I wouldn’t be Quizmaster, but neither would you. They’d have to twitch the bottle again.”

Shaeffer entered the room. He glanced at Judge Waring and took a seat. “Leon,” he said to Cartwright, “this is a bluff on his part. The girl took him the idea before he killed her. He doesn’t intend to kill you. He wants to scare you—” Shaeffer’s cold eyes flickered. “Interesting.”

“I know,” Cartwright said. “He’s going to give me a choice: Death or an *arrangement.* What’s the arrangement, Reese?”

Verrick dug into his pocket and got out his power card. “A swap,” he said. “Your card for mine.”

“That’ll make you Quizmaster,” Cartwright observed.

“And you’ll be alive. You’ll come out of this with your life. I’ll come out of it with the Quizmastership. The stalemate is broken.”

“Then you’ll have Benteley,” Cartwright said.

“That’s right,” Verrick answered.

Cartwright turned to Shaeffer. “Will he kill me if I refuse?”

Shaeffer was silent for a long time. “Yes,” he said at last. “He’ll kill you. He won’t leave here without killing you or getting Benteley back. If you don’t trade, he’ll pop you and give up his card. If you trade, he’ll have Benteley again. Either way he gets one of you. He knows he can’t get both.”

“Which would he prefer?” Cartwright asked, interested.

“He’d prefer to have Benteley. He’s reached the point where he respects you; almost admires you. And he has to have Benteley

under control again."

Cartwright searched his pockets until he found his neat little package of power cards. He sorted through them slowly. "Is this legal?" he said to Judge Waring.

"You can trade," Waring said gruffly. "People buy and sell them all the time."

Benteley half-rose. Helplessly, he gestured. "Cartwright, are you really—"

"Sit down and keep still," Judge Waring snapped sharply. "You have no say in this."

Cartwright found the correct card, checked it with his other papers, and then laid it down on the table. "There's mine."

"You're willing to trade?" Verrick demanded.

"That's right."

"You understand what it means? You're legally giving up your position. With your card goes everything."

"I know," Cartwright said. "I understand the law."

Verrick turned around and faced Benteley. The two of them gazed at each other a moment, neither of them speaking. Then Verrick grunted. "It's a deal," he said.

"Wait," Benteley said thickly. "For God's sake, Cartwright. You can't just—" He broke off futilely. "You know what he'll do to me, don't you?"

Cartwright ignored him; he was returning the little package of p-cards to his coat pocket. "Go ahead," he said mildly to Verrick. "Let's get it over with so I can go downstairs and see how Rita is."

"Fine," Verrick said. He reached forward and picked up Cartwright's power card. "Now I'm Quizmaster."

Cartwright's hand came out of his pocket. With his small, antiquated popper he shot Reese Verrick directly in the heart. Still clutching the power card, Verrick slid forward and lay with his face against the table, eyes wide, mouth slack with wonder.

“Is it legal?” Cartwright asked the old Judge.

“Yes,” Waring admitted admiringly. “Absolutely.” He nodded solemnly. “Of course, you lose that packet of cards you hold.”

“I realize that,” Cartwright said. He tossed them to the Judge. “I like it here at the resort. This is the first time I’ve ever been in a modern leisure resort. I look forward to sunning myself and taking it easy. I’m an old man and I’m tired.”

Benteley sagged. “He’s dead. It’s over.”

“Oh, yes,” Cartwright agreed. “It’s completely over.” He got to his feet. “Now we can go downstairs and see how Rita is.”

SEVENTEEN

Rita O'Neill was on her feet when Benteley and Cartwright entered the infirmary. "I'm all right," she said huskily. "What happened?"

"Verrick's dead," Benteley said.

"Yes, we're all finished," Cartwright added. He went up to his niece and kissed the pale transparent halo of bandage that covered the woman's face. "You've lost some of your hair."

"It'll grow back," Rita said. "Is he really dead?" She sat down shakily on a glistening medical table. "You killed him and came out with your own life?"

"I came out with everything but my power card," Cartwright said. He explained what had happened. "Now there's no Quizmaster. The bottle will have to be twitched ahead. It'll take a day or so to set the mechanism forward." He grinned wryly. "I should know; I've worked on it often enough."

"It's hard to believe," Rita said. "It seems as if there's always been a Reese Verrick."

"It's true, though." Cartwright searched his pockets and brought out a dog-eared black notebook. He made a check mark and then closed it. "Everything but Herb Moore. We still have that to worry about. The ship hasn't yet landed, and the Pellig body is somewhere in the area, somewhere within a few hundred thousand miles of Flame Disc." He hesitated, then continued, "As a matter of fact, the ipvic monitor says Moore reached Preston's ship and entered it."

There was an uneasy silence.

"Could he destroy our ship?" Rita asked.

“Easily,” Benteley said. “He could probably wreck a good part of the Disc at the same time.”

“Maybe John Preston will do something to him,” Rita suggested hopefully. But there was no conviction in her voice.

“Part of this depends on the next Quizmaster,” Benteley pointed out. “Some kind of a work-crew should go out and try to round up Moore. The body will be deteriorating; we might be able to destroy him some way.”

“Not after he reaches Preston,” Cartwright said gloomily.

“I think we should approach the next Quizmaster on it,” Benteley persisted. “Moore will be a menace to the system.”

“Very easily.”

“You think the next Quizmaster would agree?”

“I think so,” Cartwright said, “since you’re the next Quizmaster. That is, assuming you’ve still got the power card I gave you.”

Benteley had the card. Unbelievingly, he got it out and examined it. The card flipped from his trembling fingers; he pounced on it and swept it jerkily up. “You expect me to believe this?”

“No, not for another twenty-four hours.”

Benteley turned the card over and studied every part of it. The p-card looked like any other; the same shape and size and color and texture. “Where the hell did you get it?”

“The original owner thought five dollars was a good price for it, considering market conditions. I forget his name.”

“You’ve been carrying this around?”

“I’ve been carrying a whole packet of them around,” Cartwright answered. “I took a loss on that one, but I wanted to make sure you accepted it. And I wanted to be sure it was a legal, binding transaction. Not a loan but a regular sale, the kind that goes on constantly.”

“Give me awhile to adjust.” Benteley managed to get the p-card back in his pocket. “Is this really on the level?”

“Yes,” Cartwright said. “And don’t lose it.”

“Then you’ve worked out a system of prediction. The thing everyone has been looking for. That’s how you got to be Quizmaster.”

“No,” Cartwright answered. “I can’t predict the bottle twitches any better than the next person. I have no formula.”

“But you had this card! You know what’s coming up!”

“What I did,” Cartwright admitted, “was tamper with the bottle machinery. During my lifetime I’ve had access to Geneva a thousand times. I threw a bias on it. I can’t predict what it’s going to do, so I did the next best thing. I set up the numbers of the power cards I had been able to buy in such a way that they constitute the next nine twitches. If you think a minute, I got to be Quizmaster on my own power card, not one I bought. I should have worked that out better; that gives me away, if anybody stops long enough to analyze it.”

“How long ago did you begin to work on this?” Benteley asked.

“When I was a young man. Like everybody else I wanted a fool-proof system by which I could predict the twitches. I studied all the papers on bottle construction, Heisenberg’s Principle, everything related to randomness and prediction, cause and effect. I got in as a general repairman of electronic equipment. When I was in my late thirties I worked on the bottle at Geneva, down in the basic controls. By that time I realized I couldn’t predict it. Nobody could. The Uncertainty Principle is on the level; the movement of sub-atomic particles on which the twitches are based is beyond human calculation.”

“Was that ethical?” Benteley asked. “That kicks over the board, doesn’t it?”

“I played the game for years,” Cartwright said. “Most people go on playing the game all their lives. Then I began to realize the rules were set up so I couldn’t win. Who wants to play that kind of game? We’re betting against the house and the house always wins.”

“That’s true,” Benteley agreed. After a time he said, “No, there’s no point in playing a rigged game. But what’s your answer? What do you do when you discover the rules are fixed so you can’t win?”

“You do what I did: you draw up new rules and play by them. Rules by which all the players have the same odds. And the M-game doesn’t give those odds. The M-game, the whole classification system, is stacked against us. So I said to myself, what sort of rules would be better? I sat down and worked them out. From then on I played according to them, as if they were already in operation.” He added, “And I joined the Preston Society.”

“Why?”

“Because Preston saw through the rules, too. He wanted what I wanted, a game in which everybody stood a chance of winning. Not that I expect everybody to carry off the same size pot at the end of the game. I don’t intend to divide the winnings evenly. But I think everybody ought to have his chance at those winnings.”

“Then you knew you were Quizmaster even before they came to notify you.”

“I knew weeks in advance. I had set a bias on the bottle the last time I was called to repair it. Every time I worked on the mechanism I threw more and more bias on it. The last time I was able to get complete control. At this moment it doesn’t operate randomly at all. I have it stacked years ahead … But that won’t be necessary, now. I didn’t have anybody to take over, in those days.”

“What are you going to do now?” Benteley asked. “You can’t hold power again.”

“I told you: I’m going to retire. Rita and I never really stopped long enough to enjoy ourselves. I’m going to spend the rest of my days sunning myself in some modern leisure resort, like this one. I’m looking forward to sleeping, contemplating, printing leaflets.”

“What kind of leaflets?”

“On the Care and Maintenance of Electronic Equipment,” Cartwright said. “My specialty.”

Rita spoke up. “You have about twenty-four hours, Ted. Then you’re Quizmaster. You’re where my uncle was, a few days ago. You’ll be waiting for them to come and notify you. That was quite a moment, when we heard them landing on the roof. And Major Shaeffer came clumping in with his briefcase.”

“Shaeffer knows,” Cartwright said. “He and I worked it out before I gave you the card.”

“Then the Corps will respect the twitch?”

“The Corps will respect *you*,” Cartwright answered quietly. “It’s going to be a big job. Things are happening. The stars are opening up like roses. The Disc is out there … a halfway point. The whole system will be changing.”

“You think you can handle it?” Rita asked Benteley.

“I think so,” Benteley said thoughtfully. “I wanted to get where I could make changes; here I am.” Suddenly he laughed. “I’m probably the first person who was ever under oath to himself. I’m both protector and serf at the same time. I have the power of life and death over myself.”

“Maybe,” Cartwright said, impressed, “that might catch on. It sounds like a good kind of oath, to me. You take full responsibility for protection and for carrying out the work. You have nobody to answer to but your own—conscience. Is that the right word?”

Major Shaeffer hurried into the room. “That’s the right word, according to the history tapes. I have some information. The ipvic monitor’s in with a final report on Moore.”

It took a moment. Then Cartwright responded. “Final?”

“The ipvic people followed the synthetic body to the point it entered Preston’s ship; you knew that. The body entered the ship, spoke to Preston, and began investigating the machinery that maintains Preston. At that point the image cut off.”

“Cut off? Why?”

“According to the repair technicians, the synthetic body detonated itself. Moore, the ship, John Preston and his machinery, were blown

to ash. A direct visual image has already been picked up by innerplan astronomers."

"Did some kind of field trigger the bomb?" Benteley asked. "It was critical as hell."

"The ipvic image showed Moore deliberately opening the synthetic's chest and shorting the bomb-leads." Shaeffer shrugged. "It would be interesting to find out why. I think we better send out a crew to see what can be put back together. I'm not really going to sleep easily until I know the whole story."

"I agree," Benteley said feelingly.

Cartwright got out his black notebook. With a look of bewilderment on his seamed, aged face, he checked off the last item and restored it to his pocket. "Well, that takes care of that. We can pick over the ash later; right now we have other things to think about." He examined his heavy pocket watch. "The ship should be landing soon. If nothing has gone wrong, Groves will presently be setting down on Flame Disc."

The Disc was big. Brake-jets screamed shrilly against the rising tug of gravity. Bits of metal paint flaked down around Groves; an indicator smashed and somewhere within the hull a feed-line snapped.

"We're about to collapse," Konklin grated.

Groves reached up and twisted off the overhead light. The control bubble faded into darkness.

"What the hell?" Konklin began. And then he saw it.

From the viewscreen a soft light radiated, a pale, cold fire that glittered in a moist sheen over the figures of Groves and Konklin and the control machinery. No stars, no black emptiness of space were visible: the immense face of the planet had silently expanded until it filled everything. Flame Disc lay directly below. The long flight was over.

"It's eerie," Konklin muttered.

“That’s what Preston saw.”

“What is it? Some kind of algae?”

“Not this far out. Probably radioactive minerals.”

“Where is Preston?” Konklin demanded. “I thought his ship was going to guide us all the way.”

Groves hesitated, then answered reluctantly. “My meters picked up a thermonuclear explosion about three hours ago. Distance from us, perhaps ten thousand miles. Since the explosion Preston’s ship hasn’t registered on my gravity indicators. Of course, with the Disc so close a tiny mass like that might not—”

Jereti came hurrying into the control bubble. He saw the screen and halted. “Good God. That’s it!”

“That’s our new home,” Konklin said. “Big, isn’t it?”

“What makes that funny light? It’s like a séance in here. You’re sure that’s a planet? Maybe it really is a space serpent. I don’t think I’d like to live around a space serpent, no matter how big it is.”

Konklin left the bubble and hurried down the vibrating thundering corridor. The silent green glow seemed to follow him as he descended a ramp and came out on the main level. At the door of his cabin, he halted and stood a moment listening.

Down in the cargo hold meager possessions were being assembled. Pots and pans, bedding, food, clothing, were being gathered up and collected. A murmur of excited, subdued voices filtered up over the din of the brake-jets. Gardner, the jet stoker, was starting to give out Dodds pressure suits and helmets.

Konklin pushed open the cabin door and entered.

Mary glanced quickly up. “Are we there?”

“Not quite. All ready to step out on our new world?”

Mary indicated their heap of possessions. “I’m packing.”

Konklin laughed. “You and everybody else. Put that stuff back where it was; we’re going to live here until we get the subsurface domes set up.”

“Oh,” Mary said. Abashed, she began carrying things back to drawers and cupboards and storage lockers. “Aren’t we even going to set up some sort of—colony?”

“Sure we are.” Konklin slapped the bulkhead above his shoulder. “And this is it.”

Mary lingered with an armload of clothes. “Bill, it’ll be nice, won’t it? I mean, it’ll be hard at first but later on it won’t be so bad. We’ll be living mostly underground, the way they do on Uranus and Neptune. That’s pretty nice, isn’t it?”

“We’ll make out all right.” Konklin gently took the clothes from her arms. “Let’s get down to the cargo hold and find ourselves Dodds suits. Gardner’s giving them out.”

Janet Sibley greeted them, nervous and fluttering with excitement. “I can’t get into mine,” she gasped. “It’s too small!”

Konklin helped her zip the heavy material. “Remember for God’s sake, when you’re outside be careful and don’t trip. These are the old type suits. You can puncture them on sharp rocks and be dead in a second.”

“Who gets to step out first?” Mary asked, as she slowly zipped up her bulky suit. “Captain Groves?”

“Whoever’s closest to the hatch.”

“Maybe it’ll be me,” Jereti said, coming into the hold and grabbing up his suit. “Maybe I’ll be the first human being to set foot on Flame Disc.”

They were still fastening their suits and talking together in small nervous groups when the landing sirens shrieked into life. “Grab hold!” Konklin shouted above the wailing din. “Hang on to something and get your suits going!”

The ship struck with a roar that tossed them about like dry leaves. Supplies and possessions pitched everywhere, as the hull twisted and bucked violently. The brake-jets moaned and fought to slow the rocking ship as it plowed hideously into the ice-hard surface of the planet. The lights flickered and faded out. In the blackness the

thunder of the jets and the ear-splitting squeal of metal against rock deafened and scattered passengers into paralysis.

Konklin was thrown against a heap of bedding. Pots and pans rained down on him; in the gloom he fought his way up until his fingers closed around a hull support. “Mary!” he shouted. “Where are you?”

In the darkness nearby he felt her moving. “I’m here,” she answered faintly. “I think my helmet’s cracked; it’s leaking air.”

Konklin caught hold of her. “You’re all right.” The ship was still moving, an inferno of sound and protesting metal that gradually slowed to a reluctant, uneven halt. The lights flickered, came on for a brief moment, and then again faded out. Somewhere moisture dripped slow and steady. Down the corridor a fire crackled among heaps of supplies that had tumbled from a locker.

“Get that fire out,” Groves ordered.

With an extinguisher Jereti made his way unsteadily into the corridor. “I guess we’re there,” he said shakily, as he covered the fire. His voice vibrated thinly in their helmet phones.

Somebody lit a flashlight. “The hull must have stood up,” Konklin said. “I don’t hear any important leaks.”

“Let’s get out,” Mary said intensely. “Let’s see it.”

Groves was already at the hatch. He stood waiting stonily until everybody was around him and then he began unsealing the heavy locks by hand. “The power is dead,” he explained. “Leads snapped someplace.”

The hatch slid back. Air whooshed out and Groves moved forward, wide-eyed and immediately silent. The others crowded onto the ramp after him; for a moment they stood awed and hesitant. Then as a group they descended.

Half-way down Mary stumbled and Jereti halted to catch hold of her. One of the Japanese optical workers touched the surface first. Agilely, he slid over the side and dropped to the hard-frozen rock,

face excited and eager within his bulging helmet. Grinning up at them, he waved them on.

“It’s okay,” he shouted. “No monsters in sight.”

Mary held back. “Look,” she whispered. “Look at it glow.”

The planet was a single plain of green light. Wherever they looked there was a faint, unwinking sheen of color, soft and unfocused, on the rocks and boulders, on the ground itself. In the dim green phosphorescence the group of men and women were strange opaque shapes, black columns of metal and plastic stepping awkwardly and hesitantly down.

“It’s been here all this time,” Jereti said wonderingly. “And nobody to look at it.” He kicked at the frozen rock. “We’re the first to set foot here.”

“Maybe not,” Groves said thoughtfully. “As we landed I saw something. I tried to come as close as possible without hitting it.” He unclipped his heavy-duty shoulder weapon. “Preston thought the Disc might be a stray from another system.”

* * *

It was a building, a structure of some kind, resting on the smooth surface ahead. It was a sphere of some dull metal, without features or ornaments. Green crystals of frozen gas drifted and blew around them as they apprehensively approached the sphere.

“How the hell do we get in it?” Konklin demanded.

Groves lifted his weapon. “I don’t see any other way,” his voice came in their phones. He squeezed the trigger and moved the muzzle in a slow circle. “This material looks like stainless steel. This thing may be man-made.”

Through the sizzling, dripping rent, Konklin and Groves crawled. A dull throbbing reached their ears as they climbed down to the floor of the globe. They were in a single chamber of whirring machinery. Air shrieked out past them as they stood peering around.

“Plug it up,” Groves said.

Together they managed to get a patch over the leak their weapon had cut. Then they turned to examine the humming bank of machinery and wiring.

“Welcome,” a dry, dusty voice said mildly.

They spun quickly, the weapon high.

“Don’t be afraid,” the old man continued. “I’m only another human being like yourself.”

Konklin and Groves stood rooted to the metal floor. “Good God,” Groves said thickly. “But I thought—”

“I,” the old man said, “am John Preston.”

A shudder rolled up Konklin’s spine. His teeth began to chatter. “You said his ship was destroyed. Look at him; he must be a million years old. And he’s in that solution.”

As if in agreement, the paper-thin lips moved, and from the mechanical speakers the dry whisper sounded again. “I am very old,” Preston said. “I am almost completely deaf and paralyzed.” The mouth twisted in a half-smile. “I have arthritis, as you probably know. And some place along the line I lost my glasses. So I can’t really make you out too clearly.”

“This is your ship?” Konklin demanded. “You landed here ahead of us?”

The ancient head, within its supporting hoop, nodded.

“He’s watching us,” Groves said. “It’s frightening. It’s not natural.”

“How long have you been here?” Konklin asked the ancient withered creature suspended in its nourishing bath.

“You will have to excuse me,” Preston answered. “I can’t come down and shake hands with you.”

Konklin blinked. “I guess he didn’t hear me,” he said uneasily.

“We represent the Preston Society,” Groves said awkwardly. “We’re following your work. Are you—”

“It has been a long wait,” the old man interrupted him. “It’s been many weary years. Many, many long days alone.”

“Something’s wrong!” Konklin snapped fearfully. “Something’s the matter with him!”

“He’s deaf and blind.”

Konklin moved toward the banks of machinery. “This isn’t a ship. It’s something else, similar to a ship but not a ship. I think—”

“I want to tell you about Flame Disc,” John Preston’s dry, harsh words interrupted him. “That’s what I’m interested in. That’s what I consider important.”

“So do we,” Groves said, baffled and confused.

Konklin was feverishly examining the smooth inner surface of the sphere. “This has no drive jets! It can’t go anywhere! It has some sort of anti-grav shield, like a marker buoy.” He leaped away from the machinery. “Groves, *this is a buoy.* I’m beginning to get it.”

“You must hear me out,” Preston was saying. “I have to tell you about the Disc.”

“There must be more of these buoys,” Konklin said. “This one must have drifted down here; pulled down by the intense gravity. There must be thousands of them, all exactly alike.”

It came slowly to Groves. “We came in contact with a series of buoys, not a ship. Each one directed us to the next. We followed a trail of buoys all the way here, step by step.”

“Do whatever you want,” the dry, inexorable voice broke in. “But listen to what I have to say.”

“Shut up!” Konklin shouted.

“I have to remain here,” Preston said, slowly and painfully, picking his words with infinite care. “I don’t dare leave. If I—”

“Preston,” Konklin shouted wildly. “What’s the sum of two and two?”

“I know nothing about you,” the relentless whisper continued.

“Repeat after me!” Konklin shouted. “Mary had a little lamb, its fleece was white as snow!”

“Stop it,” Groves snarled, on the verge of hysteria. “Have you gone crazy?”

“The search has been long,” Preston’s withered whisper rasped on monotonously. “And it has brought me nothing. Nothing at all.”

Konklin sagged. He moved away, back toward the rent they had cut. “It’s not alive. That isn’t a nourishing bath. That’s some kind of volatile substance on which a vid image is being projected. Vid and aud tapes synchronized to form a replica. He’s been dead a hundred and fifty years.”

There was silence, except for the dry, whispering voice of Preston and it went on and on.

Konklin tore away the patch and scrambled out of the sphere. “Come on,” he signalled to the others. “Come on in.”

“We got most of that on our phones,” Jereti said, as he struggled into the sphere. “What was it all about? What the hell was that Mary had a little lamb?”

He saw the replica of John Preston and his voice stopped. The others scrambled in after him, excited and breathless. One by one they came to a halt as they saw the old man, and heard the faint, dry words whispering through the thinning air of the sphere.

“Seal it up,” Groves ordered, when the last of the Japanese optical workers was in.

“Is it—” Mary began doubtfully. “But why’s he talking like that? Just sort of … reciting.”

Konklin put his stiff pressure-glove on the girl’s shoulder. “It’s only an image. He left hundreds of them, maybe thousands, scattered through space, all around here. To attract ships and lead them to the Disc.”

“Then he’s dead!”

“He died a long time ago,” Konklin said. “You can tell by looking at him that he died a very old man. Probably a few years after he found the Disc. He knew ships would be coming out in this direction someday. He wanted to bring one of them here, to his world.”

“I guess he didn’t know there would be a Society,” Mary said sadly. “He didn’t realize anybody would actually be *looking* for the Disc.”

“No,” Konklin agreed. “But he knew there would be ships heading out this way.”

“It’s sort of … disappointing.”

“No,” Groves corrected. “I don’t think so. Don’t feel bad about it. It’s only the physical part of John Preston that’s dead, and that part isn’t really very important.”

“I guess so,” Mary said. She brightened. “It’s sort of wonderful, too. In a way, it’s sort of a miracle.”

“Shut up and listen,” Konklin said softly.

They all became silent and listened.

“It isn’t senseless drive,” the withered image of the old man was saying. Its blind eyes gazed out over the group of people, not seeing them, not hearing them, not aware of their presence. It was speaking, instead, to listeners far off, watchers far away. “It isn’t a brute instinct that keeps us restless and dissatisfied. I’ll tell you what it is: it’s the highest goal of man—the need to grow and advance … to find new things … to expand. To spread out, reach areas, experiences, comprehend and live in an evolving fashion. To push aside routine and repetition, to break out of mindless monotony and thrust forward. To keep moving on …”

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